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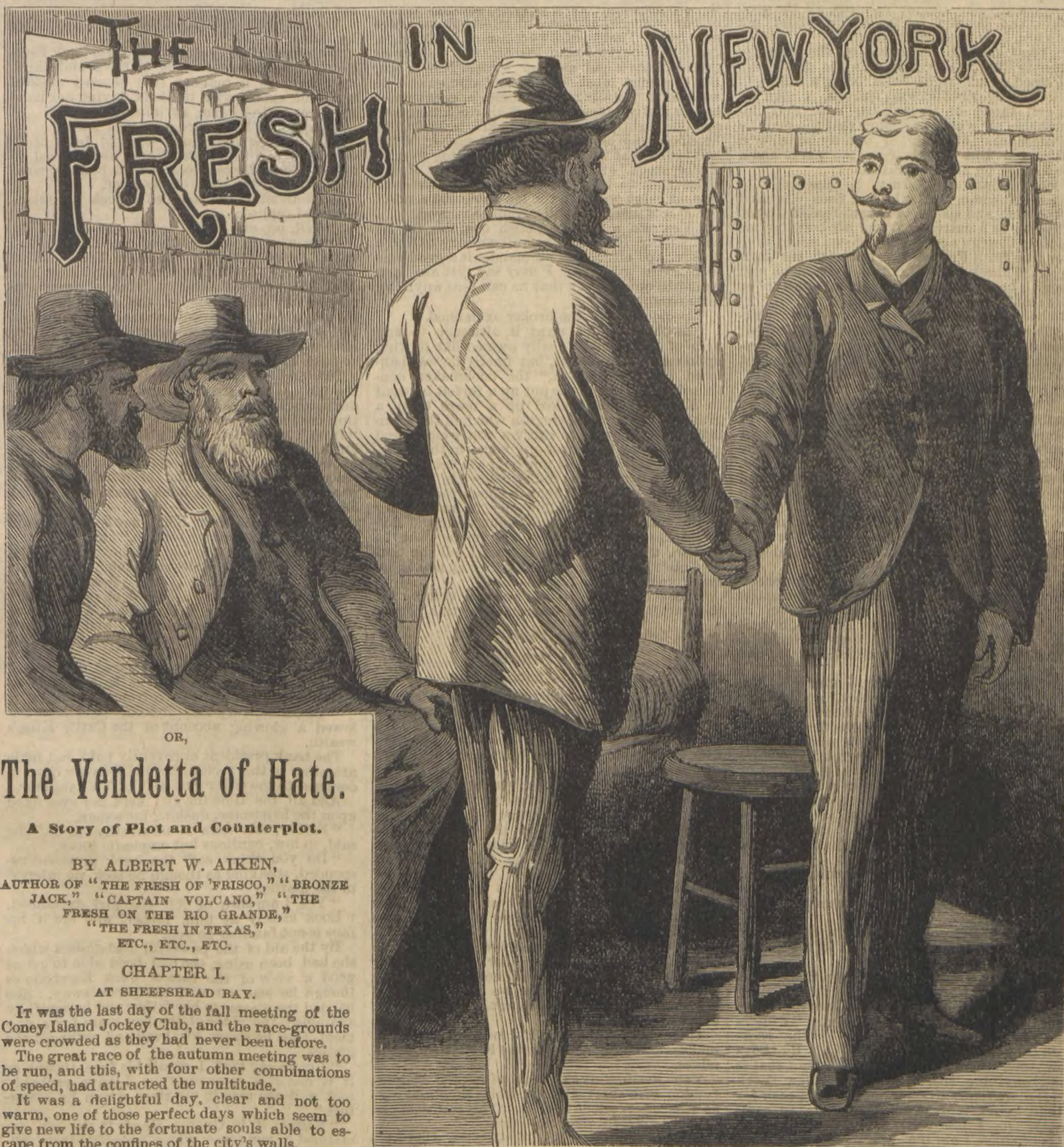
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OR,

The Vendetta of Hate.

A Story of Plot and Counterplot.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE FRESH OF 'FRISCO," "BRONZE
JACK," "CAPTAIN VOLCANO," "THE
FRESH ON THE RIO GRANDE,"
"THE FRESH IN TEXAS,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AT SHEEPSHEAD BAY.

It was the last day of the fall meeting of the Coney Island Jockey Club, and the race-grounds were crowded as they had never been before.

The great race of the autumn meeting was to be run, and this, with four other combinations of speed, had attracted the multitude.

It was a delightful day, clear and not too warm, one of those perfect days which seem to give new life to the fortunate souls able to escape from the confines of the city's walls.

The first race was over, the favorite, who carried the money of the crowd, had achieved an

"WE WILL SEE YOU THROUGH, BLAKE! YOU WERE ALWAYS A WHITE MAN AND AS SQUARE AS THEY MAKE 'EM!" THE LANDLORD DECLARED.

easy victory, and the multitude were correspondingly delighted.

The next race was a private match, which, by permission of the managers of the Jockey Club, had been interpolated in the regular programme.

It was a match-race, a single dash of a mile, owners to ride, between Clinton Van Frelinghuysen's gray horse, Commander, and Jack Escobedo's bay mare, Kentucky Princess, at catch weights.

The race excited great interest among the gilded youths of New York, for Clinton Van Frelinghuysen was one of the bloods of the metropolis; from the fact too, that the contest was for no less a sum than ten thousand dollars a side, the public at large took an interest in the matter, and now all eyes were watching eagerly for the appearance of the horses.

In that part of the track known as the quarter-stretch, sacred to the big bettors, the owners and trainers of the horses, and other great moguls, little groups of men were busily engaged in discussing the chances of the race.

One particular group, consisting of three men, we will introduce to the reader's attention.

The center man of the group, who was "laying down the law" to his companions, was a well-known sporting man, who was seldom missed from any of the meetings where money could be made.

It was Tom MacDuffie, the great bookmaker, one of the leading lights of the business. In person, MacDuffie was a short, thick-set, burly fellow, with a bulldog-like head, and though he always wore the richest raiment, all the good clothes and jewelry in the world would not make him look like a gentleman.

A most decided contrast to the squat, vulgar-looking bookmaker was the gentleman who stood on his right hand, being a tall, well-built, distinguished-looking person, a man of five and thirty or thereabouts, with that unmistakable air which proclaims that the man by education and breeding, if not by birth, is a gentleman. But in this case the party had a title to back up his appearance.

Victor, Count de Morney, he was called, a French nobleman, but as he had been educated in England, and spoke the Anglo-Saxon tongue as fluently as a native, if it had not been for his decidedly foreign appearance no one would have taken him for a Frenchman; but with his dark face, high cheek-bones, luxuriant mustache and imperial, he presented the popular idea of a noble Gaul.

He had but lately arrived in New York, making the grand tour of the world as he explained; a man of princely fortune, possessed of vast estates in France it was understood, he had naught to do but to follow pleasure as she flies.

Although he had not taken the trouble to bring letters of introduction—he had no idea of spending more than a few days in the great metropolis of the New World—yet he obtained an *entree* to fashionable society without trouble, for a half-dozen or more of the gilded youths of Gotham had met the count in gay "Paree" and were delighted to be able to introduce him to their friends in New York, and probably there is no city in the wide world where a "real, live lord" is more esteemed than in New York; so De Morney was induced to reconsider his determination to make a brief visit only.

In fact, he had become so favorably impressed with the delights of the American metropolis that he seriously talked of settling down in Gotham for life; although, as he said, he was such a thorough cosmopolitan that it would be difficult for him to remain satisfied in any one city for a long time.

The count was a good representative of the modern Gaul devoted to "le sport," and already the high-flyers of the metropolis had discovered that De Morney was a blood of the first water.

The third one of the group was another well-known man about town, Barrington Plunket by name. He was a broker, a man of forty-five or thereabout, a well-preserved, portly fellow, with a round, fat face, the lower part covered with a short brown beard, and a nose so prominent as to suggest that its owner was a member of the tribe of Israel, although he claimed to be an Englishman.

The three were discussing the coming race and MacDuffie, being well-posted, as it behooved a man in his line of business to be, was giving his companions points.

"Now, gents, if you have got any ducats that you want to put up on this race it is my advice to back Jack Escobedo's mount!"

"It is an astonishing stake, ten thousand a side," the count remarked.

"I can tell you the bull history of the thing!" the bookmaker exclaimed. "I allers make it a pint of gitting at the roots of all sich deals as this here. All the boys know that when they git hold of a pint that is worth anything, there's no man in New York who is more ready to shell out the solid cash for it than yours truly, Tom MacDuffie, to command. Ob, I tell you! if there is anything inside of rings, I am the man to smell 'em out, and you kin bet I know this bull business from beginning to end. It was that particularly big high-flyer, Clint Van Frelinghuysen, who start-

ed it. Clint is a young fellow who, by the death of an old miser of a grandfather, lately came in for a million or so, and he has jest been going it with a perfect looseness ever since; the odds are big, you know, that he will go broke before long if he don't pull up a trifle."

"I have heard of the young man, although I have never chanced to meet him," the count remarked. "The other one is also a stranger to me, this Jack Escobedo, but I should think from the name that he is a Spaniard."

"You have come pretty close to it; he is a Mexican," the bookmaker replied. "Or he comes from out that way, although I believe he is not a foreigner by birth. Anyhow, he don't look like any Spaniard or Mexican that I ever saw, for he has light hair and blue eyes, and is lighter complected than I am. He is a new-comer to the city, although he don't live in town, but has a regular palace of a place up on the Hudson, near Tarrytown. They do say that he is worth four or five millions, all made in the cattle business out West."

"Quite a nice little sum," the count remarked. "And possessed of a fortune like that, this gentleman ought to be able to enjoy himself in a city like New York," and De Morney exchanged a meaning glance with the broker as he spoke, the looks not being noticed by the bookmaker, who chanced at the time to have his attention attracted to the course.

"Yes, and some of the sports thought they would like to show the stranger 'round; do the honors, you know; give him a chance to get rid of a little of his wealth; but he wouldn't have it. He doesn't drink or gamble, and the charms of fair women don't seem to have any influence over him. That is easily accounted for, though, for he is a married man, and his wife is about as good-looking a gal as ever struck New York. But as a man must have some amusement, he went into breeding rare horses in great style; he has just commenced to get his stock together, and one night, at an up-town club, he and Clint Frelinghuysen happened to come together. Clint had heard that this Mexican was going to raise choice stock, and he bantered him to find a horse able to beat his Commander, owners to ride, at catch weights, for ten thousand a side."

"A bold challenge!" the count observed.

"Yes, and a mighty foolish one, too, for he was giving Escobedo the hull country to find a hoss in, and although Commander is a good hoss—an extra good one, I may say, yet any man would be crazy to say that he can beat anything in the country."

"Decidedly so!" the broker exclaimed.

"Escobedo didn't want it, although to any man of judgment it really seemed like picking up money in the street, but finally he was bantered into the match," the bookmaker continued. "And arter he put up a forfeit he went to Kentucky and picked up a mare there, a grand-daughter of Lexington who had the reputation of being able to carry a top weight and give a beating to almost any horse in the State. She had not been raced much for she belonged to an old gentleman who didn't believe in the turf, and, being well fixed, kept the mare for his own riding and would not allow her to run. They do say that Escobedo gave eight thousand dollars cash for her, and you can judge what the 'talent' think of the match when I tell you that you can't get better odds than two or five ag'in' her from any of the bookmakers."

"They are in the saddle and are coming for the start!" the broker exclaimed, at this point.

CHAPTER II.

ESCOBEDO IS RECOGNIZED.

THE broker was right; the contestants were coming up for the start, but as both horses were full of fire, the pair cantered up and down the track in front of the grand stand for a few minutes, so that the multitude had a good chance to examine them.

Clint Van Frelinghuysen was a rather tall, slender young man with the light hair and blue eyes of the old Dutch race from which he came, quite a decided contrast to his opponent, who was a well-built, muscular man of thirty-five or thereabouts, a handsome fellow with his clear-cut, resolute features, crispy curls of golden hue, clinging tightly to his well-shaped head, and cold gray eyes "as deep in their depths as the fathomless waves of a bottomless ocean."

So looked the man whom New York knew as Jack Escobedo, but the reader who has ever perused a certain series of novels, has doubtless recognized in the man we have described the renowned Pacific Slope sport, Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco.

There was as much difference in the men's manner of riding as there was in the men themselves.

Van Frelinghuysen rode after the English fashion with short stirrups, while Escobedo rode as ride the Western ranchmen, his seat decidedly more graceful than the other.

As the bookmaker had stated, the odds were decidedly in favor of Escobedo's mount, and after the parade before the grand stand there were but few of the backers of Commander who did

not feel like "hedging," hoping by so doing to save themselves from loss, for the bay mare looked like a sure winner.

Amid a group of ladies seated in the grand stand was Margaret Escobedo, Jack Escobedo's wife, the Texan heiress, for despite the gossip to the contrary, the Escobedoes came from Texas and not from Mexico.

Although Mrs. Escobedo had only been a year in the East yet she had plenty of acquaintances, for people who are worth millions seldom lack friends.

By Margaret Escobedo's side sat her companion, Miss Pauline, and the two, with their lady friends, were busily engaged in discussing the chances of the race.

That the bay mare would win was the unanimous opinion of all the ladies.

Some ten feet away from where the party sat was an old gentleman accompanied by a tall, handsome woman, a dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty, who took a decided interest in Jack Escobedo the moment he made his appearance.

Both the gentleman and the lady were well dressed, and the costly diamonds that they wore—the old gentleman displaying a beautiful pin and the lady a magnificent pair of ear-rings—seemed to indicate that they were favored with a goodly share of wealth.

Few New Yorkers who were "in the swim," but would have quickly identified the pair, for the old gentleman was Anson Habersham, president of that colossal money institution, the Beaver National Bank, one of the substantial citizens of Gotham, and reputed to be nearly, if not quite, a millionaire.

The lady was his eldest daughter, Katherine by name.

Both fixed their eyes intently upon Jack Escobedo, as he came cantering by the grand stand, and then, in a manner that showed decided traces of excitement, the lady, laying her hand upon her father's arm, exclaimed:

"Papa, don't you recognize that man?"

The exclamation caused the old bank president to give a slight start, and also served to dispel the perplexed look which had appeared on his face at the sight of the rider.

With an effort he assumed a look of unconcern and replied:

"Well, no, my dear, I can't say that I do. I know who it is of course," and then he read from the programme which he had, "Match race, Clinton Frelinghuysen's Commander and Jack Escobedo's Kentucky Princess, owners to ride." The gentleman on the gray horse is Frelinghuysen; I am well acquainted with him, as I was with his father and grandfather before him, so this gentleman on the bay horse must be Jack Escobedo, whoever he may be."

The bank president slightly raised his voice at the end of the sentence and the words came distinctly to the ears of a young gentleman, sitting next to Habersham; he was one of those "fresh" youngsters who prided himself upon knowing all that was going on, so, presuming upon the freedom which obtains in so public a place as the grand stand of a race-track, he proceeded to tell the bank president all about Jack Escobedo.

"A Mexican Cattle King, newly come to the city, worth four or five million," etc., etc.

"Ah, yes, yes," the old financier muttered. "New York is the lodestone which attracts all men of means. This is the place to enjoy the wealth which they acquired elsewhere."

The daughter had not allowed a word of the explanation to escape her, and her dark eyes fairly blazed with excitement as she listened.

"He is very rich, then?" she asked, apparently so anxious for information as to be unable to refrain from seeking it even from a stranger.

"Yes, miss, very rich indeed," and then followed a glowing account of the Cattle King's wealth.

The bank president apparently paid but little attention to the recital, his indifference quite a contrast to the eager curiosity of his daughter.

And all the time the girl kept her eyes fixed upon the handsome, dashing horseman.

"Father, this man is no stranger to us," she said, in low, cautious but emphatic tones.

"Do you think so?" the bank president responded, speaking as though he took no interest in the matter.

"Yes, I am sure of it!" the girl exclaimed. "Look closely at him, father, and see if his face is not familiar to you."

By the aid of the powerful field-glasses which she had been using, she had been able to get as good a view of the face of Jack Escobedo as though he was not a dozen paces away. She handed the glasses to her father and he carefully examined the rider of the bay mare for a moment, then he shook his head and returned the glasses.

"I can't say that I recall his face, though as it is one of a common type I have probably met a dozen men in my time whom he resembles."

"Father, it is George Hardy!" the girl exclaimed in low tones, which trembled from suppressed excitement.

"George Hardy?" the old gentleman asked, in a tone of question, and a puzzled look appeared

upon his face as though he was endeavoring to recall the past.

"Yes; surely you cannot have forgotten, the young man who was in the bank fifteen years ago."

"Ah, yes, I remember now," and the father nodded his head.

"You recognize him?"

"No, I cannot say that I do," and he shook his head, decidedly. "As far as I can remember, this man is not at all like young Hardy."

"He has changed, of course, but that is not wonderful when you consider that fifteen years have elapsed; fifteen years would make a difference; he has changed, but not enough to prevent me from recognizing him!"

"I think you have made a mistake, my dear Katherine, and have been deceived by a resemblance. After what occurred fifteen years ago it is not likely that George Hardy would dare to return to New York."

"Fifteen years is a long time, father," the girl replied. "And during fifteen years much may happen. He may have fancied that there wasn't any chance of his being recognized."

"Yes, that is true, but it hardly seems probable that he would come and brave the chance of arrest."

"He may have thought that after all these years there was no danger."

"True, but he ought to know that in a case of his kind the lapse of years would be no bar to a prosecution. Our New York banks are seldom disposed to allow any man to escape who has wronged them. But this is mere idle talk, my child, this man is not George Hardy, and, if I were you, I would not even suggest to any one that he is."

"But, father, I feel so sure of it!" the girl persisted.

"Well, well, it is impossible that you can know for certain," the bank president remarked a trifle impatiently. "And it seems to me that even if we were certain that this is George Hardy we are not called upon to interfere in the matter."

"What, not after the dreadful way in which he behaved?" the daughter demanded, a touch of indignation in her tones.

"No material damage was done to me personally, and I believe in letting bygones be bygones; we must not trouble ourselves about the matter."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the horses going down to the post for the start.

There was a sudden hush of conversation, all eyes being fixed upon the racers, and then there was a roar.

"They're off—they're off!" came from a thousand throats.

The starter's flag had dropped to an extremely fair start, but the bay mare had taken the lead at once, and as the pair came past the grand stand there were few of the spectators, even at that early stage of the race, who believed that Frelinghuysen stood any chance of winning.

On they went, and a perfect Babel of cries ascended in the air.

The Kentucky Princess was a dozen lengths in advance of the other, and those spectators who were watching the race through field glasses asserted that the bay mare was under a strong pull, evidently having reserve speed, while Commander was plainly doing his best, and yet was not able to reduce the lead which the other had gained.

Half the distance was covered and the cry began to go up:

"Kentucky Princess wins!"

CHAPTER III.

THE RACE IS NOT ALWAYS TO THE SWIFT.

"Yes, yes, Kentucky Princess wins!"

"Two to one on Kentucky Princess!"

"Three to one on the bay mare!"

"Five to one on Escobedo's mount!"

"I reckon a hundred to one wouldn't find many takers at this stage of the game!" the burly bookmaker, Tom MacDuffie, remarked to his companions.

"In my opinion it is all over but the shouting!"

The others agreed with him in regard to this. But there is an old proverb which says the race is not always to the swift nor the battle to the strong.

The chapter of accidents must always be taken into consideration.

It was fated that Jack Escobedo was to win this match, although the bay mare was a better animal than the gray horse.

At the lower turn, when the Kentucky Princess had such a commanding lead that it did not seem possible she could fail to win, just as the multitude were shouting themselves hoarse, there was the sharp crack of a rifle—the spectators were making so much noise that the sound did not come to their ears, and then it was fired from the outside of the track, a good quarter of a mile from the grand stand.

It came distinctly though to the ears of the riders, and hardly had it ceased when the gallant bay mare gave a sudden convulsive spring forward, then slackened her pace, the gray

horse coming up to her—at which the multitude roared louder than before—then down on her knees she went, pitching her rider over her head, rolled over on her side, gave an almost human groan, and died.

Jack Escobedo was not hurt by his tumble, being prepared for it.

The report of the rifle had come distinctly to his ears, and when the mare gave her convulsive leap, he understood that she was hit.

The life of adventure which he had led had prepared him to encounter any little mishap of this kind.

Immediately he comprehended what had occurred.

Either some secret foe had attempted his life, or else it was a scheme to make him lose the race by disabling his horse; the latter surmise was the more probable, for, to his knowledge, he had no foes in the East who would be apt to attack him.

There were plenty of men in the wilds of the West upon whose toes he had trodden, but it was not likely that any of them would take the trouble to pursue him to the East.

The shot came then from some man determined that the bay mare should not win the race.

It was a bold attempt and had succeeded to perfection.

The annals of the turf are full of such instances.

When men risk fortunes on the uncertain chance of a horse's speed, some of them are vile enough—the professional bettors in particular—to adopt any means, no matter how unfair or foul, to win.

Frelinghuysen passed the mare just as she fell, and as soon as possible he pulled up his horse, wheeled around and returned.

By this time Jack Escobedo was on his feet, none the worse for his fall.

"Are you hurt, Jack?" exclaimed Frelinghuysen.

"No, I'm all right, only a little shaken up, that is all."

"I was afraid you had broken your neck!" the young man cried.

"No, I saw I was in for a header, and so prepared myself, but the mare is done for!"

"I heard a shot, but I had no idea that it was fired at us."

"Yes, and a well-aimed one it was, too; the scoundrel put a hole just back of the shoulder, and has probably cut the mare's heart in twain. Some of these rascally bookmakers are at the bottom of it, I suppose. The fellow was concealed in that bit of timber yonder," and the speaker glanced in the direction of a little group of trees a couple of hundred yards from the track.

"Shall we give pursuit?" Frelinghuysen inquired.

"Oh, no, there is no chance of catching the fellow," Jack Escobedo answered. "This scheme is no snap affair, but a carefully prepared one, and of course you can depend upon it that a plan of escape was not neglected."

"I hope, Escobedo, you haven't any suspicion that I had ought to do with this miserable outrage?" Frelinghuysen exclaimed.

"Oh, no! You are a gentleman, Frelinghuysen, and a man of honor, and I would no more think of connecting you with a miserable steal of this kind, than to suspect you of being a pickpocket."

"Thank you! I felt sure you would do me justice!" exclaimed the young man, much affected by the blunt reply.

"Go ahead! and ride your race out; the match is yours."

"Oh, do you think I would claim the money after you have been the victim of such a dastardly bit of sharp practice?" Frelinghuysen exclaimed, indignantly.

"It is yours according to turf rules—the race was pay or play, and I fancy the bookmakers will be prompt enough to claim their gains."

"Yes, but I am a gentleman and not a bookmaker, and I will not touch a penny of the stake!"

"It is at your command."

"Not a penny!" exclaimed Frelinghuysen. "If I were to take it I should consider myself almost as bad as the rascals that put up the job!"

By this time some of the mounted officers of the course were on their way to the scene.

"Here comes assistance and I will ride up to the judge's stand and report."

Jack Escobedo nodded and away galloped Frelinghuysen.

"Well, old girl, if I had had an idea that such a tragedy was going to happen I never would have brought you from your native blue grass pasture in old Kentucky!" exclaimed Escobedo, a sad expression on his face as he looked down at the once bouny bay mare, now cold in death.

On his way to the judge's stand Frelinghuysen met the officers and explained to them what had taken place, and great was their amazement for no such outrage had ever been perpetrated on an Eastern race track.

One of the officers at once departed to give the case into the hands of the detectives, the celebrated Pinkerton men, who had charge of the

policing of the track, and a detachment of them were dispatched to examine into the matter; and not to keep the reader in suspense we will here state that amid the trees, from whose shelter the shot had been fired, the detectives found a Winchester rifle, which bore plain marks of having been recently discharged.

A horse had been tethered back of the trees, and by the aid of the animal the doer of the dastardly deed had evidently escaped.

The Pinkerton men tracked the horse to the highway, which he had reached by a round-about route, but there, amid so many hoof-prints, it was not possible to distinguish this particular horse's tracks from the others, and whether the fugitive had gone up or down, it was not possible to say.

The people who lived in the neighborhood were questioned, but not a soul had noticed any horseman.

The culprit had evidently abandoned the rifle for fear it might lead to his detection. The search was kept up for a couple of hours in all directions but no clew was secured.

As Jack Escobedo had remarked, the race was "pay or play," and so it was given to Frelinghuysen, although he declared he would not take the money.

As for the general public they were wild with rage, for almost all the betting was on the bay mare, and the bookmakers, who were winners, were correspondingly elated.

The crowd were so indignant though at being cheated out of their money, as they termed it, that they actually threatened to lay violent hands on the bookmakers, whom they accused of being at the bottom of the rascally trick, and had it not been for the fact that there was a strong police force present there would undoubtedly have been trouble.

But one of the most indignant men on the track was Tom MacDuffie.

"Ah, wot are ye giving me?" he exclaimed, angrily, when an exasperated bettor openly said to him that all bookmakers were skins and frauds. "You don't want to say that to me or I'll hammer ye! I'll give you to understand that I am as square a man as there is on this track to-day, and if there was a job put up, I had no hand in it! My books are open for the examination of anybody, and they will show that I don't stand to win a thousand dollars on this race. I thought Jack Escobedo had a sure thing, and I wasn't anxious to lay ag'in' him, and I reckon you will find all the rest in the same boat. Why, if I had known that Commander had a sure thing of it, I would have bet all I could raise on him!"

The other bookmakers talked in the same strain, and as they offered to show their books, the officers of the jockey club, spurred on to it by the angry bettors, made an examination, and found that it was as they had said.

There had been very little public betting on the race: the bookmakers asked such odds on the Kentucky Princess that the public did not invest heavily.

But if the turfmen had not formed the plot who then was at the bottom of it?

That question none could answer.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STRANGER.

ELEVEN o'clock in the night of the day during which the great match race had occurred at Sheepshead Bay.

The cafe attached to the Hoffman House was well filled with patrons.

Cafe is the polite term for bar-room, and the Hoffman House saloon with its paintings, statues and luxurious adornments—the most costly fitted up saloon in the country, probably—is one of the favorite lounging-places of the bloods of great Gotham, and the tip-top sporting men who are to be found in such numbers in the great metropolis.

"Where the carrion is, there come the vultures."

Of course it is understood that none but first-class and well-dressed vultures are allowed in a high-toned saloon like the Hoffman House cafe.

Men poorly clad, no matter whether honest men or rascals, would be very soon given to understand that their room was better than their company.

The cafe, like all well-patronized saloons in the great city has a "bouncer," whose business it is to see that order is kept and that no low-lived, common rascals annoy the kid-gloved patrons of the establishment.

The bouncer was a retired prize-fighter, a well-dressed, gentlemanly fellow, who would never be taken by a stranger for an ex-champion of the prize-ring.

On this night of which we write, there was an unusual crowd in the saloon and the strange occurrence which had cost Jack Escobedo the loss of the match race was the general topic of conversation, for the majority of the crowd had attended the races at Sheepshead Bay that day.

As on the track, it was the prevailing opinion that the bookmakers had planned the trick. The public at large are always ready to pitch into the betting fraternity, whom they consid-

er to be at the bottom of all mischief on the turf.

There were a few old heads, though, who disapproved from this opinion; they were men who looked beneath the surface and were not disposed to be led away by popular clamor.

As one of them said:

"If the bookmakers put up this job—or any combination of them—they would have taken pains to make a big book on the match; having a sure thing they would have offered such odds that the betting public would have been induced to back Escobedo largely, and they would have eagerly snapped up every bet that was offered; it would not have taken long for the news to get around that somebody was anxious to back Commander, and the state of the odds would have been affected immediately, just as rumors affect the price of stocks.

"Then, too, where did they get the man to do the trick? No ordinary hanger-on to a stable would be able to do a piece of work like that. It is a different matter from getting at and dosing a horse.

"No, no; the public are barking on the wrong scent when they cry out that it is a piece of jockey trickery, and the detectives had better turn their attention to hunting up some private foe of Jack Escobedo, for it is some enemy of his who did the job."

This was also the opinion of the Pinkerton men, although they were careful not to say so for fear of alarming the doer of the deed; but when they applied to Escobedo for information, he replied that he was unable to give them any, for, to his knowledge, he had no foes, a reply which bothered the bloodhounds, as it afforded them no clew upon which to work.

The matter was being discussed in all its aspects at the time that we introduce the reader to the gilded saloon and its occupants.

The bouncer, who by reason of his quiet, gentlemanly behavior, was a general favorite of the regular patrons of the saloon, moved amid the groups exchanging a word here and there, and keeping his eyes open for any unwelcome customers.

While thus engaged, his attention was attracted by a young man, a stranger, whom he did not remember to have ever seen in the saloon before.

This person was young, not over twenty-two or three, a slenderly-built, undersized fellow with an extremely dark face, and the bouncer, who rather prided himself upon his knowledge of mankind took him to be a Spaniard.

The young man was nicely dressed, being attired in the height of fashion, and, although a stranger, had scraped an acquaintance with some of the regular frequenters of the place; not a difficult matter when an exciting topic is being discussed.

The young man was well-provided with money and carried his "roll" in the most careless manner in the inner breast-pocket of the Prince Albert coat which he wore. It was really a roll of bills, too, not confined within a wallet, or pocketbook, but just folded up.

The bouncer had noticed this circumstance and it was the fact that the young man was so careless with his money which had first attracted his attention to him.

The gentleman had invited his newly-made acquaintances to take a drink with him, and ordered a bottle of champagne with the air of a millionaire.

As it happened, the party with whom he was conversing were all bloods of the first water, so they took it as a matter of course, but the keen-eyed bouncer made up his mind to have a talk with the stranger as soon as possible.

He was near enough to him to see that he had a good bit of money in his roll, for there were more five and ten dollar bills in it than ones and twos.

A second bottle of wine the dark-faced stranger stood, before the bouncer got a chance to interview him, then the bloods were called away by some friends and the bouncer improved the opportunity to accost the stranger.

"I beg your pardon," he said, in his easy, gentlemanly way. "I don't think I have ever had the pleasure of seeing you here before."

"No, it is my first visit—my first visit to New York in fact," the other answered, his tone and manner showing that he was a man of education and breeding.

"You are also a stranger in the country I should judge."

"No, you are wrong there; I am an American."

"Is that possible? Well, I would never have thought it from your looks."

"Yes, I am aware that I do not look like a native of this country, but I am though."

"Of foreign parentage, I presume?"

"No, my race has been in this country for the last hundred years."

"You astonish me!"

"The explanation is a simple one," the young man remarked, smilingly. "I am a French Creole from Louisiana. My name is Auguste Robeline."

"Ah, yes, yes, I see; that explains the mystery. My name is Edwards."

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Edwards!" and

the youth, for he was nothing more, shook hands with the gentlemanly bouncer in the warmest manner. "Will you join me in a social glass?"

"Well, I don't mind."

Then the pair had a "small bottle," and this was the opportunity that the bouncer sought, for as the Creole was putting up his money after paying for the wine he took occasion to remark:

"You will excuse me, Mr. Robeline, for saying that that is an extremely unsafe way for you to carry your money."

"Do you think so?" exclaimed the other with an air of surprise.

"I do indeed, and I presume you will believe that I know what I am talking about when I inform you that I am the detective employed to look after this place."

"Well, you ought to know then."

"Yes, I have seen a thing or two during my lifetime, and think I am up to snuff. Now you have considerable money in your roll I should judge."

"About two hundred dollars, or thereabout," the Creole replied, carelessly, as though the sum was a mere trifle to him.

"Well, you understand that in a public place of this kind it is almost an impossibility to keep out all bad characters."

"Oh, undoubtedly."

"I am pretty well posted in regard to the crooks and when I see any man of shady character in here I give him a quiet hint to get out as soon as possible; but the fellows are up to all sorts of tricks, and some of them are so clever in disguising themselves that they can deceive even an old hand like myself; and then there are strangers popping up all the time who are not known, and we detectives don't get on to them until they are caught in some deviltry."

"Yes, yes, I see," observed the Creole, who was listening with the utmost attention.

"Now the odds are big that some crooks are in the room this very minute, and you can bet all you are worth that if there are any of them around they have spotted you and your roll. You are just the kind of man that these fellows are after."

"I can understand that," the Creole remarked, with a quiet smile.

"Now, I suppose you think that by keeping your money in your breast-pocket, you will be able to bid defiance to a crook?"

"So it seems to me."

"Not at all. A first-class fellow in that line always wears a ring with a little spring-knife in it. The 'mob'—there are always three or four who work together—get round you, and while they attract your attention, the head crook slits your coat open with the knife, just over the pocket, so that your roll drops right out into his hand."

"Ah, yes, I see!" exclaimed the Creole, as if a sudden light had come to him. "Many thanks! I will be on my guard, and, thanks to your warning, doubtless will be able to take care of myself."

Then they had another drink, and after renewing his thanks, the Creole departed.

"A mighty wise little fellow, but awful green," was the bouncer's comment.

CHAPTER V.

THE HAWKS.

"A VERY friendly fellow, indeed," the Creole uttered as he passed out into the night. "I am indebted to him for his warning. He evidently thinks, though, that I cannot take care of myself, but I trust I will be able to show him, or any rascals who try to get the best of me, that though I am a stranger to the metropolis, yet I am no greenhorn."

The young man halted for a moment upon gaining the open air, looked up and down the street, and then started for Madison Square.

He had not got ten feet away from the saloon when a couple of well-dressed men emerged from the cafe, and followed in his footsteps.

Both looked like Englishmen; one was short and rather thick-set, the other tall and lanky. Their faces were smoothly shaven, and though neither one could be called ill-looking, yet there was something about them which would have impressed an extra good judge of mankind with the idea that they had no claim to the title of gentlemen, although they were arrayed in fine style.

"Where do you s'pose the bloke is going?" said the short man, who spoke with a decided English accent.

"I don't know, Bill," responded the other, his voice low, well modulated and singularly pleasant. "To his hotel or boarding-house, wherever that may be, I suppose."

"I think as how our game is to shadow him?"

"Yes, decidedly," the other replied. "He has got a big roll, and we must have it."

"We can do the trick up brown if it can be worked," the short man remarked in a confident way.

"Yes, we do not usually fail, and I think we can pull this off all right, unless this bloke is unusually clever."

"He don't look it," the other asserted.

"No; men who are up to a thing or two, do

not, as a rule, pull their roll out in a saloon, before everybody. This young man is a stranger to New York, and though Edwards put him on his guard, yet with two such downy coves as we on his track, he will have to be a smart one to keep his valuables."

The two had contrived to overhear the conversation between the detective and the young Creole, yet had managed the matter so skillfully that even the sagacious Mr. Edwards had no idea that the pair had been eavesdropping.

These two were a pair of as dangerous crooks as the metropolis had ever seen; but as they were strangers—recent importations from across the "herring pond," "men who had left their country for their country's good"—and had not been detected in any rascality since coming to this "land of the free and home of the brave," they were unknown to the detectives.

The short, thick-set fellow was known as Spider Bill; William Davids was his name, but among his companions he was never called anything but Spider Bill. From his unnaturally long arms, short stature and cruel, vindictive disposition he got the nick-name. Ostensibly he was a pugilist, but long ago he had forsaken the prize-ring for the career of a crook.

His companion, who was known among the crooked men as Long Toby, the Preacher, bore the reputation in England, and on the Continent, of being one of the most dangerous men who ever sought to gain a living by preying upon his fellow-men.

He had "the gift of the gab," as the saying is, was wonderfully expert in assuming disguises, and his associates boastfully declared that he could give points to any actor that ever trod the stage.

It was commonly reported among his pals, and believed by them, that Toby Bristol, as his right name was supposed to be, had been educated for a minister, and some actually asserted that he had been ordained as a preacher, but had fallen from grace and joined the ranks of the men who preyed upon the world, hence his flash name, "the Preacher."

As the reader will understand after this explanation, the young Creole stranger had two of the most dangerous crooks in New York on his track, but he went carelessly on, never taking the trouble to look behind him, and the crooks, noticing this, whispered gleefully to each other that the stranger had not the remotest idea that he was followed.

When the Creole came to Madison Square he crossed Broadway and entered the Park.

"Aha! I think we will get a chance at him," Long Toby remarked with an air of great satisfaction.

"Say, you ain't a going to make a try at him in the Park, are you?" the Spider exclaimed in astonishment. "There's too much light, and them Park peelers are allers snooping round; we'll make a botch of it, sure."

"Don't you be alarmed," the other responded. "I am not going to run any risk; I play a safe game always. The Park is no place for business, but after he gets through the Park into one of the quiet and rather dark streets on the other side, then comes our chance."

"Ah, yes, I twigs!" exclaimed the Spider, in accents of admiration. "You have got a head on your shoulders, Preacher, and no mistake!"

"Yes, most of my acquaintances have been kind enough to express that opinion before," the lanky crook replied. "And I have an idea that the opinion is not far out of the way. I believe I was around when heads were given out."

On through the Park went the young stranger, sauntering along carelessly, and about a hundred yards behind him came the crooks.

There were few people in the Park and if it had not been for the brilliant electric light, and the presence of the Park policemen, the birds of prey would quickly have swooped down upon their victim.

"Wot will be the racket, anyway?" the spider asked.

"We will shadow him until he gets in the middle of some block and then watch our opportunity to pass him at a moment when there isn't any one around. You hit him with your sand-club and I will catch him as he falls; it will not take but a second for me to get at his roll, and then, if anybody should happen to come along, we can cry out that the gentleman has had a stroke of something, and ask the party to take care of him while we run for a doctor."

"Beautiful!" exclaimed the Spider. "That is as fine a lay-out as I have ever struck, and there ain't a doubt that it will work all right. I am lightning quick with the club, and I will go bail that if I hit him he will have a stroke of the worst kind right arter it, and a man has got to be pretty near me too, and with mighty sharp eyes for to see me give the lick."

This was no idle boast, for the Spider was wonderfully quick, and long experience had taught him so that he knew exactly where to strike.

The Creole proceeded directly across the Park as though he intended to proceed down one of the side streets, running from the broad avenue which bounds the Park on the east, but when he arrived within a hundred yards of the street, he

abruptly wheeled in to one of the benches placed by the side of the walk and seated himself.

This movement took the crooks by surprise, and involuntarily they slackened their pace.

"What's the peppergram now?" the Spider asked, in a hoarse whisper.

"We had better take seats on the bench, for if we passed him, and lay in wait beyond, he may notice us, and then all the fat would be in the fire, for if his suspicions were once excited it would be good-by to any chance of taking him by surprise."

"That's so! that's solid sense, every time!"

"We can take seats on the bench and perhaps get into conversation with him, and although the place is pretty light, yet if there comes a time when there isn't anybody around we might be able to do the sand-bag act right here."

"It would be taking a mighty big risk," the Spider observed, a little doubtfully.

"Big risks pay sometimes," the other replied, sententiously. "Anyhow, we will not risk it unless a favorable opportunity presents itself."

These few words had been rapidly exchanged, and by the time that Long Toby completed his speech the two were nearly abreast of the bench.

"Let us set down and enjoy the air for a while," the long crook said in his smoothest tones. "It seems too early to go to bed yet."

"All right," responded the other.

The pair spoke loud, so that the young stranger on the bench could hear their words.

Then they sauntered to the bench and took seats.

The Creole was on the east end of the bench, the crooks on the other.

With his brilliant black eyes the young stranger surveyed the two men for a moment, and then, in a sociable way, he remarked:

"It is a pleasant night, gentlemen."

"Very pleasant, indeed; the air is balmy and delightful; a night to make a man feel at peace with himself and all the world," the Preacher responded, in his easy, graceful way.

The unexpected speech of the stranger had set a new train of thought to work.

Since he was inclined to be sociable, why could not his acquaintance be cultivated? His behavior in the saloon had shown that he was not disposed to be reserved, or to stand upon his dignity; if they could succeed in establishing friendly relations with him, why then it would be an easy matter to induce him to come with them to some "crooked" saloon where he could be "dosed" and then plundered without any trouble.

The scheme seemed to be feasible, and the Preacher resolved to bend all his energies to make it work.

CHAPTER VI.

A SURPRISE.

"An extremely delightful night," the lanky crook continued. "I do not think we have had as fine a night for a month."

"Yes, that is true, I think."

"And do you believe this weather will continue?" the Preacher asked, using a delicate tone of deference, just as though he believed that the opinion of the other upon the subject would be as law and gospel.

"Oh, I suppose the chances are that it will; I am not particularly well qualified to give an opinion on the subject, for I am a stranger in the city, and therefore not well acquainted with the climate."

"My own case exactly, I am a stranger, too—in fact, a stranger to the country!" the crook explained, with a well-simulated outburst of confidence.

"Well, I am an American, but as I come from the extreme South I am not well posted in regard to New York weather."

"I am an Englishman, as is also my friend here, and we have only been in the country a month, but so far we are delighted with it. My name is Jones—Archibald Jones, and I am from Liverpool. I was in the hardware business there and made a good bit of money, but some American friends of mine advised me to come to this country. They said that a man with a little capital at his back could do a great deal better in this country than in the old one, and from what I have seen of America since I have been here I believe they were right."

This was designed to draw the young stranger out and lead him to give an account of himself, but it did not work, for the Creole simply said:

"I don't know much about it, but I should judge that this country would be better for a man in your line of business than England."

"That is my idea."

"Hardware did you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Files, chisels, jimmies and handcuffs, eh?" and the Creole laughed as he put the question.

The two crooks were annoyed, for this was so entirely unexpected, and so singular that they did not know what to make of it.

Was it possible that this apparently frank and careless stranger suspected their game and was amusing himself at their expense?

It seemed to be incredible and yet it looked like it.

The tall crook did not betray though that he had any suspicion that there was a double meaning to the question, but with a bland smile he replied:

"Yes, I carried a general stock—a very well assorted one indeed."

"Principally burglar's tools, I suppose," the Creole remarked, quietly.

This time there was no mistaking the drift of the other's meaning, and the pair of rascals began to feel decidedly uncomfortable.

How in the name of all that was wonderful had the stranger "dropped" to their little game?

Such was the question they asked themselves, and were not able to answer.

The Preacher, despite his amazement, concealed it perfectly, and put a bold face on the matter.

"My dear sir, I am completely in the dark in regard to your meaning. I am a reputable business man and do not understand your allusion to burglar's tools."

"Isn't articles in that line about all the hardware that you ever handled?" the Creole asked with a careless laugh.

"Do you mean to insult me, sir?" exclaimed the crook, assuming an air of resentment, while the Spider felt in his pocket for his sand-club and cast a look around to see if there was anybody near enough to see what was going on if he proceeded to give the impudent stranger "one for his nob."

The Preacher had also cast a wary glance around, for the same idea had come into his head.

Unfortunately for the two crooks, there was a big, powerful-looking man, seated on a bench on the opposite side of the walk, about fifty feet away, and as he had his eyes upon the three, apparently watching them intently, it was plain that the pair could not hope to attack the young man and escape, for the powerful electric light made everything as visible about as by day.

The man had a stout stick in his hand too, a regular club of a cane, so he was prepared for war.

"Oh, no, it is no insult to tell the truth to a man, is it?" the Creole asked.

"But I am at a loss to understand why you should assume that a gentleman like myself should have anything to do with burglars' tools?" the crook exclaimed, with well-simulated indignation.

"You overheard the talk between the detective, Edwards, and myself in the Hoffman House saloon," said the young man abruptly, and much to the astonishment of the others.

"Eh?" exclaimed the Preacher, so much amazed by this unexpected question that, despite his natural coolness, he knew not what to say, while the Spider simply stared in angry wonder.

"I say you overheard the conversation between myself and the detective, Edwards, in the saloon. There is no use for you to deny that you overheard what we said, for I had my eyes upon you, and know that you were listening. Then, when I left the saloon you followed me. You saw that I had money and marked me for a victim. But I am not quite the greenhorn that you take me to be. My display of money in the saloon was for the express purpose of attracting the attention of gentlemen in your line of business."

This announcement took the pair completely by surprise, for it was entirely unexpected, and the Creole, watching their faces closely, plainly saw their amazement written on their countenances.

"Oh, it is the truth, gentlemen!" he exclaimed. "I laid a trap for you and you tumbled into it. In fact, I never succeeded better in anything I ever undertook in my life, and I think that when you come to reflect upon this matter, you will admit you two have been completely fooled."

And now in the eyes of both the crooks appeared evidence of anger, and the young stranger, anticipating that they were thinking of attacking him, made haste to say:

"Now, my worthy friends, don't allow your indignation at the trick I have played upon you to carry you away. Don't be rash enough to make an attack upon me, for it will surely cost you dearly."

"I am all prepared for you; see!"

And as he spoke, the Creole drew his right hand from the side pocket of the sack-coat he wore, and showed an ugly-looking knife, the polished blade of which glistened brightly in the rays of the electric light.

Then, after displaying the knife, the Creole rested his hand against his side in such a way, that the knife was concealed from view.

The crooks were amazed at this unexpected evidence that the stranger was prepared for a fight, and the showing of the knife at once put to flight their idea of making an attack upon him.

"Of course it is not necessary to tell gentlemen of your experience that when it comes to a struggle at close quarters a knife like this, in the hands of a man who knows how to use it, is an extremely ugly weapon, one far more dangerous than a pistol; I hope, gentlemen, you

will not think I am boasting when I say that there are few men in the country who can handle a knife better than myself, for I have been used to knife-play from boyhood; in my Southern home the natives pride themselves upon their skill with knives."

"Another point; do you notice that muscular fellow over there with the cane—more a club than a cane really?"

This was the party whom the crooks had noticed when they had looked around to see if the coast was clear so that they could attack the Creole.

"You see him, of course," the young stranger continued. "Well, he is my man. You did not notice him in the saloon for the very excellent reason that he was not there, but waiting on the outside, and his orders were to watch and see when I left the saloon if I was followed, and if so, then he was to follow the men who followed me, and be prepared to come to my rescue in case of an attack. You see, gentlemen, the thing has worked to a charm."

By this time the crooks had recovered from their amazement; curiosity had taken the place of surprise, and the Preacher was too able a rascal not to feel considerable admiration for the way the game had been worked.

"Well, my friend, I must say that you have played your cards extremely well," the lanky crook remarked. "And as I have had considerable experience in such games as this I think I may say that I am a pretty good judge; but one thing puzzles me."

"What is that?"

"Why have you taken all this trouble? What was your object in luring us on to attack you, for, of course, if you had not flashed your money so openly in the saloon we would not have been tempted to go for you."

"The explanation is a simple one: I wanted to make the acquaintance of some of the crooked men of New York."

The pair stared.

"For what object?" the Preacher asked.

"I have often heard, and read, that men who make a business of preying upon their fellows generally work in gangs, and that, as a rule, in all great cities, New York, London, Paris for instance, there is to be found well-organized bands who work on a large scale."

The Preacher's face assumed a thoughtful look while his companion became suddenly uneasy.

"I have an idea that you are a first-class man in your line, and I have no doubt you can give me the information I desire, if you will."

CHAPTER VII.

A NIGHT TRIP.

THE Preacher reflected for a few moments before he replied, while his companion, a low-grade rascal in every respect, looked around with a nervous air, as though he expected to see the detectives make their appearance, and was getting ready for a bolt.

"My dear sir," the crook began, "it is plainly to be seen that you are a man of skill and discernment, and any one who picks you up for a greenhorn will make a woeful mistake; now, as a man of the world, I put it to you, supposing I do know of any such organization as you speak of, is it likely that I would give it away to the first stranger that asks me in regard to it?"

"The point is well taken," the Creole remarked with an approving nod. "I will explain why I want to be put into communication with a first-class, organized band. In the first place, let me state that I arranged this little trap into which you two fell, so you would understand that I am a man of brains, and from that you may infer I would not be apt to go into anything without a good reason. I am not a detective, nor in league with detectives. I desire to be brought in contact with first-class men who follow a crooked life because I believe I can put them in the way of doing a good stroke of business. I think I can propose something which will put a fortune in their way, and in mine also."

The Preacher nodded as much as to say that the idea struck him favorably, while Spider Bill's nervousness vanished and a knowing grin appeared on his face.

"It 'pears to me that this 'ere gent is a-talkin' quite sensible like," he remarked.

"Bring me into communication with one of the leading lights of the crooked world, the man who plans, and I will explain to him my scheme at length," the Creole said. "Then, if he is not satisfied, he is not obliged to go into it, and no harm will be done."

"Well, as far as I can see, you are right there," the Preacher remarked. "I don't see any harm in introducing you to a certain party, who, if you succeed in satisfying him, will be able to put you in the way, maybe, of getting at what you want."

"That is satisfactory, and as an earnest that I mean business, and am prepared to help those who are willing to help me, here is a trifle for you two gentlemen."

The Creole drew two twenty-dollar bills from his vest pocket and gave them to the pair.

"Much obliged!" exclaimed the Preacher, while his companion ducked his head and grin-

ned. "You are the kind of man I like to do business with, for you seem to be rolling in wealth."

"Well, I have got my share, and I can put you and your pals in the way of making a big haul if they feel inclined to do business with me."

"I will see the party to-night and give you an answer to-morrow."

"That will do," the Creole replied. "I will meet you here to-morrow night at eight o'clock; that will give you time to see your man and explain matters."

"Yes, that will do. At eight o'clock to-morrow night then I will meet you here."

"At eight," replied the Preacher as he and his companion rose to their feet. "And you will find me prompt to the minute. In business I never keep anybody waiting."

Then the Preacher made a polite bow, the Spider ducked his head clumsily, and the pair departed.

"What do you think of it, pard, is it a plant?" the Spider asked, evidently suspicious, when the two were well out of hearing of the Creole who remained seated upon the bench.

"No, I don't think it is. I don't think there is any trick about it. The man means business and I have no doubt he will put us in the way of a good thing," the other replied. "As far as my judgment goes the captain will be safe in hearing what he has to say."

"Captain White?"

"Yes, of course—who else?"

"Say, who is Captain White anyway?"

"Well, now, Spider, you know just as much about it as I do. Captain White is Captain White."

"Ah, don't be so fly!" the Spider cried. "Do you s'pose I don't know that Captain White ain't his real name?"

"Old pal, that is something that neither you nor I need to trouble our heads about," the Preacher observed in a significant way. "Captain White is a very able and elegant gentleman, and since we have been doing business with him he has put us in the way of some very good jobs."

"Yes, but if we had been acting on our own hook we might have picked up others just as good," the Spider remarked in a grumbling sort-of-way.

"Spider, you are one of those unfortunate men who are never satisfied," the Preacher observed with a grave shake of the head. "It is true that if we acted on our own hook we might pick up a good job now and then, but if we should happen to be unlucky enough to get caught we would have to depend upon ourselves to get out of the scrape."

"That is true enough; we wouldn't have no Captain White to come to our assistance."

"You are right; no Captain White to hire the best lawyers to be got to talk us out of the hole—to provide bondsmen, so that if there wasn't any chance for the lawyers to get us off, and the judge or jury couldn't be got at, we could skip out of the country."

"Well, I s'pose it is a good thing for coves like us for to have a man like Captain White at our back," the Spider remarked, after reflecting over the matter for a few moments.

"No doubt about it."

"But, old pal, he takes the lion's share of all the jobs we do, and it ain't often that he does any of the work either," the other grumbled.

"Well, Spider, that is the way the trick is always worked," the Preacher answered. "The man who gets the big money usually does the least work. The general, as a rule, don't go in to the fight like the common soldier. The boss who plans gets the big whack, every time!"

The Spider, in his grumbling way, declared that he did not think this was right, and the two men went on discussing the point.

On the following night, prompt to the minute, the Preacher made his appearance in the Park.

The Creole was awaiting him.

"It is all right," the crook said. "I have seen a certain party and he is willing to have an interview with you, so, if you are all ready, we will go along."

"I am ready," the young man replied.

"We will walk over to Sixth avenue and take the Elevated."

"All right."

The two men proceeded to the avenue named, and ascended the long flight of steps to the station of the Elevated Road.

There was a train at the station—they were on the up-town track—and, by running, the pair were just able to get on board, the Preacher lagging a little behind so as to be the last to board the car, and the Creole, who was keeping close watch upon his actions, taking particular care though not to allow the other to ascertain this fact, saw that he cast a hurried glance behind him as the train moved away from the station.

The stranger understood what this meant, and a sarcastic smile curled his lips.

"Oh, it is all right," he said. "You need not bother yourself to watch. I have not put any spy upon our track. We are not followed."

The crook laughed; he saw that the other was

up to his dodge, and was too old a bird to deny the truth.

"Well, to a man in my line of business caution comes as a matter of course, and it is the most natural thing in the world for me to keep my eyes about me so as to be sure that I am not shadowed."

"You did not discover any spy?"

"No, and if any one was trying to 'pipe' us off, this jump for the train would leave them behind."

The pair rode clear to the end of the road.

"We are coming quite a distance," the Creole observed, as they descended to the street.

"Yes, the party whom I am taking you to see lives quite a ways out."

At the foot of the stairs a buggy stood, and as the pair came to the street the Spider jumped out of the vehicle.

"Here you are!" he exclaimed.

"We have got a little drive before us," the Preacher explained.

"All right; I am agreeable," the Creole responded.

Then the pair entered the buggy, the crook took up the lines, and away they went, leaving the Spider, grinning, on the sidewalk.

"Upon my word, you have arranged this very well!" the Creole exclaimed. "If I had been in league with the detectives, and this desire of mine was merely a pretext to lead the police spies to the meeting place of your gang, I should have only had my labor for my pains, for the keenest spy on the force would not be able to track us, thanks to these precautions which you have taken."

The Preacher nodded.

"You are right, and though I told the captain I thought you was all right and that it was not a plant, still he thought it wise to go ahead on the idea that there was some gum-game, so these precautions were taken. You can see from the way the thing has been worked that you are dealing with first-class men."

"Oh, yes, and that is the kind I want to meet," the Creole remarked. "The scheme I have to propose is a big one, and only first-class men can work it."

"You'll find the captain—Captain White is his name—A. No. 1!" the Preacher asserted.

CHAPTER VIII.

CAPTAIN WHITE.

ON went the two through the darkness; the Preacher driving with the confidence of a man who was well acquainted with the way.

They only proceeded up the avenue a block and then turned to the left and drove through narrow by-streets for a good half-hour.

The Creole understood why this devious, roundabout course had been taken. It was to confuse him so that it would not be possible for him to follow the route afterward, but although the Creole had keen eyes and a clear head, and did his best for a while to endeavor to see where they were going, particularly to remember the turns that were made, yet he was compelled to give it up as a bad job.

They were fully an hour on the road, and at last drove in through a gate into the grounds of a country house.

The place was on a country road where houses were few and far between.

There were no signs of life about the house as they drove past it—no lights, nothing to denote that it was inhabited.

The Preacher drove the buggy to the rear of the house and there halted.

"We have arrived," he said.

The pair alighted, and the crook led the way to the house; he opened the rear door and a dark passage was disclosed.

"Go ahead ten or twelve steps and you will come to a door on your right hand, open it and you will find the man who will talk to you about this business."

"Very well."

The Creole proceeded into the entry, and as he did so the door closed behind him.

"I am in for it now," he muttered. "If I was a police spy, I am in a trap from which I would not be apt to escape to tell the tale."

But, although knowing he was helpless in the hands of the crooks, into whose lair he had so boldly penetrated, the young man went on like one who did not know the meaning of the word fear.

He came to the door, opened it and entered the room into which it led.

The apartment was a medium-sized one, plainly furnished.

In the center of the room was a small, round table, and by the table, in arm-chairs, sat two men, attired in plain, dark business suits.

Both were good-sized men, and wore full beards, which completely covered all the lower part of their faces; their hair was bushy, and came low down over their foreheads; at the first glance the Creole decided that both the men wore false beards and wigs, and this disguised them so well that it would hardly be possible for any one to recognize them when the disguise was removed.

One of the men—the bigger one of the two—had hair and whiskers dark red in color, and the other's were jet black; the complexion of

this second man was strangely and unnaturally white, possibly due to the sharp contrast of the extremely black hair which almost covered the face.

At once the Creole jumped to the conclusion that this was the Captain White of whom the crook had spoken.

"Good-evening; glad to see you, sir. Shut the door and take a seat," said the black-bearded man in a gruff voice, evidently assumed to disguise his natural tones.

The Creole complied with the request.

"Now we will not waste any time in beating about the bush, but go right at the matter in hand," the black-bearded man continued, when the Creole was seated. "We understand that you want to be put in communication with certain parties."

"Yes, I want to see the chief of an organized band who live by crooked work."

"That is putting it right in plain English," the other remarked. "It is as well, though. Well, sir, I think you are in the right shop now. I am known as Captain White, and among the crooked men of the metropolis I have the reputation of being at the head of as big a gang of men who live by breaking the laws as has ever existed in this country. This is my lieutenant, Mr. Moses," and he waved his hand to the red-bearded man, who bowed to the Creole.

"Captain White, you are the man I am looking for," the young stranger remarked.

"My name is Auguste Robeline, and although I am a stranger in this section of country, yet I think I can put you up to a game which will pan out in a first-class manner."

"That is what we are always after, and from the skillful way in which you worked the trick which caught two of our best men, I have an idea you are a fellow of infinite talent."

Despite his gruff way of speaking, and the roughness that this Captain White assumed, it was evident to the quick-witted Creole that he was no common man, but one of breeding and education. Otherwise he would not be apt to be at the head of a powerful organized band, for a common, uneducated rascal would not be able to control such a gang.

"You flatter me," responded the Creole with a bow. "But I have always been credited with possessing a fair share of brains."

"May I ask if you are a regular professional?" the captain inquired.

"Well, yes, in a certain line."

"And that line?"

"Road-agent."

"Ah, yes, I see, a little wild West business?"

"Yes."

"We don't do much in that line in the East; no opportunity for it here."

"I presume not, but this scheme which I have in my mind is not in the road-agent line."

"I imagined that."

"There is a certain party, living in the neighborhood of New York, who is enormously wealthy, and the funds are in a portable shape so that they can be easily got at," the Creole explained, the others listening with the utmost attention. "Now my scheme is to make an attack on these valuables; it is a big game, a big risk and a rich stake to be won, for the party is worth about three millions of dollars."

Both of the disguised men uttered a cry of surprise for this was more than they were prepared for.

"Three millions!" Captain White exclaimed.

"Yes, and as I said, nearly all of it is in such a shape that it can be carried off if we are only able to get at it."

"We can work the trick if mortal men can do it!" Captain White exclaimed in a confident way.

"Ah, yesh," said Mr. Moses, speaking with such a strong Jewish accent that the Creole at once jumped to the conclusion that it was assumed, "my tear, ve can vork der trick if it can be vorked, und don't you forget it!"

"And now the name of the party?"

"It is probably familiar to you, for he has been occupying a good share of public attention lately, and I have no doubt you keep posted in regard to what is going on."

The others nodded.

"The party has a house on the Hudson, near Tarrytown."

Captain White and Mr. Moses looked at each other.

"The name is Jack Escobedo."

The Creole had his eyes on the two men as he made the announcement and saw an expression of astonishment appear on their features.

"The name is familiar to you, as I expected," Robeline observed, quietly.

"Yes, it is; both Mr. Moses and myself were on the track at Sheepshead Bay when his horse was shot."

"You witnessed that event then?"

"Yes."

"Well, I was the man who shot the horse," the Creole remarked in his quiet way.

The others stared.

"It is the truth, gentlemen; I am not a man given to boasting, and I think I may say without egotism that it was a neat piece of work. I cleared a couple of thousand dollars by the operation, as I bet against him, and then I bear

this man no good will; there is a bitter personal grudge in the matter. Some friends of mine in the far West were badly used by this Jack Escobedo and I want to square the account as soon, and as completely as I can."

"It is an odd circumstance, Mr. Robeline, one of those strange coincidences which are continually happening in this world," Captain White remarked, slowly and in a reflective way.

"I do not understand—"

"Why, my attention has already been called to this stranger, and I have been speculating as to whether it would not be a good idea to go for him."

"I am too late, then; well, I am sorry," the Creole remarked. "I was in hopes to meet with some gentlemen who would be willing to go in with me, for, as I said, there is no doubt in my mind that the thing can be made to pay well."

"Don't be hasty, my dear sir!" Captain White exclaimed. "The subject was merely mentioned, that is all. Nothing was settled, and we shall be very glad indeed to have you go in with us, eh, Mr. Moses?"

"Mine gootness, yesh!" the red-bearded man exclaimed.

"I am pleased to hear it, for I feel sure we can make a big stake. The greater part of this Escobedo's property is in such a shape that if we can only get at it we will not have any difficulty in disposing of it."

Captain White rubbed his hands together gleefully.

"That is just what we want!" he exclaimed.

"A big stake, and the property is in such a condition that there will not be much trouble in turning it into cash, eh, Moses?"

"Yesh, yesh, my tear!"

And then the three began to plot; with what result the reader will see anon.

CHAPTER IX.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

As we intimated to the reader, the man whom New Yorkers knew as Jack Escobedo was the same that on the Pacific Slope, and on the border in Texas, along the Rio Grande, was known as Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco.

And on the Sheepshead Bay track, during the match race, was a well-dressed gentleman who recognized in Jack Escobedo an old acquaintance.

This party was a finely-built fellow of thirty, or thereabouts, with a smoothly-shaven, determined-looking face.

"So Jack Escobedo is Jackson Blake," he mused. "I would like to see him, but the question is would he care to run across old acquaintances from the West now that he is in the swim with these New York bloods? It will do no harm to meet him just by accident as it were, and then, if he don't care to see me, no harm will be done."

Acting on this idea the gentleman proceeded to question some of the stable-boys in regard to Mr. Escobedo, and had no trouble in ascertaining that the gentleman had his headquarters at the Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York.

That night at about eight o'clock, this party sauntered into the Fifth Avenue Hotel, and right in front of the office encountered the man he sought.

And glad indeed was he, who was now known as Jack Escobedo, to see the other.

"Dave Ringwood, as I'm a living man!" he exclaimed, advancing with outstretched hands.

"The same, and at your service as ever!" Ringwood declared; then the two shook hands in the most hearty manner.

"Well, Dave, I am mighty glad to see you," Escobedo declared. "You were one of the best pards I ever had."

The reader who has followed the fortunes of Jackson Blake in the two novels entitled "The Fresh on the Rio Grande," and "The Fresh in Texas," will remember that Dave Ringwood, the old-time sporting man and once genteel gambler, had been an extremely able lieutenant and had served the Fresh in the most faithful manner.

"I am glad to hear you say it," Ringwood rejoined. "It is a satisfaction to a man to know that he is appreciated."

"Come up-stairs to my room so we can have a talk at our leisure. I am keeping bachelor's hall here now, for Mrs. Escobedo has gone up the river."

"I was at the track this afternoon and that is how I happened to know that you were in New York."

"Ah, you saw that little accident?"

"Yes."

"You are just the man I want to consult about that matter. I was thinking of you just before you came in; strange, wasn't it?"

"Yes, rather odd, but such things are happening every day."

Then the two proceeded up-stairs to Escobedo's apartments.

The Fresh of 'Frisco was living in style now, a parlor and two bedrooms, one being for the accommodation of Miss Pauline Melville, his wife's particular friend and constant companion, who always accompanied her.

"Well, old fellow, I'm deucedly glad to see

you!" Escobedo exclaimed, placing a chair for the other. "Sit down and make yourself comfortable, and as talking is dry work we will have a bottle of wine to moisten our throats, and then we can drink to old times in Texas."

The wine was ordered.

"I suppose you have made the discovery that in the East here I am not known as Jackson Blake, but as Jack Escobedo?"

"Yes, and if I had not happened to see you on the track I would not have known that you were in New York, although Escobedo is not a common name, and knowing that you had married Miss Margaret, if the name had come to my notice, I should have wondered if it was any relative of your wife."

"That would be natural; the explanation of my change of name is simple enough. Instead of my wife taking my name, I took hers. As with the name came the millions of the old cattle king, I thought it was only right that if I had the benefit of the money, I ought to keep the name alive. And then, there was another reason, too, and the second much more powerful than the first.

"As Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, I had acquired a reputation that would not have recommended me to good society in this Eastern country."

"Very true."

"Of course, there is an old saying that money covers up everything. To a certain extent, it is true, but it does not work that way all the time.

"For the sake of the wife, not for my own, for I do not care a penny what anybody says about me, I wanted to come East free from the reputation which I had acquired in the West. My name there was not as good as it might be, although some of the deeds ascribed to me were fabulous in the extreme. The old adage about a man living down a bad reputation might be cited, but it seemed to me to be a great deal better to start fresh, and so here in the East I am Jack Escobedo. I have been here two years now, and no one has recognized me, or if they have, nothing has been said about it."

"I think you were wise to play such a game," Ringwood remarked.

The wine arrived at this point, and the two old pards pledged each other.

"Here's to the banks of the Rio Grande!" was the toast Escobedo gave.

"And now, old pard, as I told you, I had you in my mind just before you came in. What are you doing? Are you free to join me again? For if you are, a position is open to you, for I need just such a man."

"Oh, yes, I am at liberty and glad of the chance," Ringwood replied. "I came East here as the agent of a company of speculators who had got hold of some valuable mines in Arizona. I was to boom the company and sell the stock so as to raise money to carry on the works."

"Ah, yes, I see; well, that was a good business."

"It really looked as if I had got hold of a big thing. I am no greenhorn, and I thought I knew a thing or two about mining matters, but in the hands of this gang of sharpers I was as a pigeon in the clutches of a hawk. The thing was a fraud from beginning to end. The mines were all 'salted'—that is, you know, good ore from good mines was introduced, so as to give the impression that the leads were valuable."

"Yes, that is an old game which has been played a thousand times."

"I don't doubt that it would have worked all right this time, and the fellows would have made a fortune out of the thing if they hadn't quarreled among themselves."

"When thieves fall out honest men get their dues," Escobedo quoted.

"It was so in this case; the company went to smash and left me stranded here in the East, and I have had a narrow shave from being jailed as one of the rascals."

"When one door shuts another opens," and here, like a guardian angel, I come to your rescue."

"I'm your man! But I say, how does this kind of life agree with you?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I find it deuced dull, and I often catch myself longing for the old days when at times I was uncertain where the next meal was to come from," the other replied, honestly.

"I am not suited for a hum-drum business life. I could never content myself with being shut in an office for six or seven hours a day, and to lead a life of leisure, after the style of these New York bloods, would be equally as bad. Of course, the income from three millions of dollars is amply sufficient to support myself and wife in good shape, although the money is chiefly invested in United States bonds, which only bear a low rate of interest, but my idea was to put the money where it would be absolutely safe—where there could be no danger of its being lost.

"Margaret, my wife, is an angel of a woman, far too good for me, and though we get along very well together—we have never had a quarrel or the slightest approach to one since we have been married—yet there is not between us that

feeling which should exist between husband and wife.

"She is not conscious of it, for she is somewhat cold and phlegmatic by nature, and never having known the warmth of the passion which should exist between two people who are joined together for life, does not miss it. She is lovable and affectionate, and does all she can to make me happy, and I have tried my best to be contented. I have given up gambling, and drink very little, though hard drinking was never one of my vices. In fine, I have striven to behave myself as the husband of a woman worth three millions of dollars ought to behave."

"I have a large farm up on the Hudson and have gone into stock raising on a big scale; not as on the Texan plains, but choice cows, horses, pigs and sheep."

"This match I was bantered into, and it was the first thing of the kind I have indulged in since coming East, and it will be the last, too, for the wife disapproves of it. She is beginning to incline toward religion, and I have an idea, from certain things which have occurred, that there is some one who, under pretense of talking religion to her, is trying to make trouble between her and myself."

"That should be looked into."

"Yes, and that is what I want you for. I am going to make a sort of a detective out of you."

"Well, now, that is odd," Ringwood observed, reflectively. "But, do you know, I always had an idea that I would do very well in the detective line. I did a little acting once, spent some three years on the stage, and so would be an adept at disguising myself."

"I do not doubt you will fill the bill to perfection," Escobedo declared.

"Well, you can depend upon my trying."

"Mortal man can do no more," Escobedo observed.

"But the matter that I most want you to take in hand is this shooting business."

"You want me to find out who killed your horse, and why the deed was done?"

"Exactly."

"I should not think that would be a difficult matter."

"Is that your opinion?"

"It is."

"Well, I don't know about that," and Escobedo shook his head.

"The rule, I believe, in all cases of this kind is to find out who would profit most by the deed."

"Yes, that is the good old detective theory."

"It generally works well."

"I see you are going on the idea that the bookmakers are at the bottom of the thing."

"Most decidedly!"

CHAPTER X.

A BIG STAKE.

AGAIN Escobedo shook his head.

"My dear fellow, to use the old saying, I am afraid you are barking up the wrong tree."

"Don't you think the bookmakers were the men who put up the job?" Dave Ringwood asked, somewhat astonished at the positive manner of the other.

"I do not!"

"It was the general opinion on the track today."

"Yes, I know that; but the public at large are always ready to pitch into the bookmakers, looking upon them, you know, in the light of natural enemies; it is the old saying, give a dog a bad name and hang him."

"That is very true; public sentiment ran very high against the betting men."

"Let me explain why I think the bookmakers were not in it," and then he related the particulars of the investigations which had been made by the officers of the course.

"You see," he continued, "none of the betting men stood to win a large sum, for they believed that the Kentucky Princess had a sure 'sinch' on the race, to use the turf slang, and they were not eager to lay money against her, but if any of the fraternity had been aware that by foul play the race was to be snatched from me, why, it stands to reason, the man would have been eager to bet every penny he could raise against me."

"You are right, by Jove!" Ringwood exclaimed. "But who else had a motive?"

"Now you are asking a riddle which is not easily answered," Jack replied, thoughtfully. "I will admit to you, Ringwood, that the affair has annoyed me. Whoever fired that shot was an expert marksman and might just as well put the ball through me as through the horse. There was a motive for it, of course, such an outrage would never be perpetrated without a powerful incentive."

"If it had taken place in the wilds of the West I should say that it was a bit of personal vengeance, and the shot which killed the horse was really aimed at you."

"Yes, that would be a reasonable explanation, but this is not the West, and I know of no one in the East who holds a grudge against me,

for I haven't had a bit of trouble with any one since I came here."

"Has your wife a discarded suitor, or anything of that sort?"

"No, she has never been troubled with lovers, with the exception of that scoundrel of an Escobedo whom we finished on the Texan prairies."

"If he was alive now I would be willing to swear it was his work!" Dave Ringwood declared.

"Yes, but he is dead, and long before this the mortal remains of Manuel Escobedo have returned to the dust from whence they sprung; the bunch grass grows thickly over his grave by the rolling waters of the yellow Rio Grande. But he and his sister, Isabel, who was fully as dangerous a foe as the brother, died in that fight when we so neatly caught them in a trap."

"Yes, I know it, I helped to bury the brother, but the sister, if you remember, was carried down the stream, and we did not recover her body. Is there not a possibility that she may have escaped?" Dave Ringwood asked, thoughtfully.

"I do not think so. I had my eyes on her when she sunk; she was in the midst of the fugitives when they broke under our fire and essayed to escape by swimming their horses across the river; our men poured a destructive volley into them, and she was hit and badly too, if I am any judge, and as the current of the river was rolling along at a pretty rapid rate the odds are a hundred to one that she perished."

"Very true, and you would have been apt to have heard from her before now if she had escaped."

"Yes, she was not the kind to either forget or forgive."

"Well, I will see what I can do in the matter although there does not seem to be much to go on."

"The regular detectives are engaged on the case, and as an incentive for some pard of the man who did the trick o betray him, I have offered a reward of a thousand dollars for any information which will lead to his discovery."

"That ought to work."

"Yes, it was by advice of the chief of police that I made the offer, for he said it was his experience that rascals could rarely be induced to stick to each other if a big stake could be grasped by a traitor."

"It seems reasonable."

"Only one weak point: suppose the man who fired the shot was acting entirely alone?"

"Ah, yes, I see."

"If he had no accomplices, no one could betray him."

"What do the detectives say to that?"

"Oh, they feel sure that there were three or four men in the matter, and they are banking strongly on the thousand-dollar offer being so great a temptation that some one of them will surely betray the others."

"Time will tell," Dave Ringwood remarked. "Meanwhile I will try my luck although I don't exactly see where, or how, I shall commence."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a servant who brought the message that Mr. Frelinghuysen and a party of his friends would like to see Mr. Escobedo.

"Show them up," said Jack. "This is the gentleman against whom I rode to-day," he explained.

In a few minutes Frelinghuysen with three friends, all young bloods like himself, made his appearance.

After the introductions were over the young man explained the reason for his call.

"I have just received the cash which was put up on our race, you know," he said. "I told the gentlemen that I was not satisfied to take it, for to take money won in such a way seemed to me to be nothing more than sheer robbery, but they insisted that as the race was P. P., play or pay, I was entitled to the money."

"That is just what I told you on the track!" Escobedo exclaimed.

"Yes, but I am not satisfied to take it, you know!" Frelinghuysen declared. "You know very well, my dear fellow, that if it had not been for the accident I would not have stood the ghost of a show to win. My horse was well pumped out at the time, and you would have won with hands down."

"What I *would* have done and what I *did* do are two entirely different things it seems to me," Escobedo observed, dryly.

"Yet, my dear fellow, I cannot consent to take this money!" Frelinghuysen persisted.

"By Jove! old fellow, do you know that if I kept these stakes it would seem to me as if I had a hand in the death of your horse?"

"No one that knows you would ever dare to think of charging you with such a thing!" Escobedo exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, of course I know that. But, my dear fellow, I should really feel as if I was profiting by the work of a mysterious scoundrel, if I took this money. You are entitled to the whole of it."

"Oh, no, I will not take it; if you feel troubled about the matter, we might draw the stakes, or I will tell you what I will do, I will match pennies with you to see who takes the whole."

The young blood stared at this announcement.

"What?" cried Frelinghuysen, who could hardly believe he heard aright, "you propose to match pennies for twenty thousand dollars?"

"That is my say-so!" Escobedo replied. "And it seems to me to be an extremely easy and sensible way of settling the difficulty."

"Yes, but it is a colossal sum to risk upon a single venture!"

"So much the better! We will be the talk of the town, and there will not be a soul who will dare to say that we haven't sporting blood in our veins."

"By Jove! I'll go you!" exclaimed the young man, dazzled by the magnitude of the affair.

"Good boy!" cried one of his companions, while another patted him, encouragingly, on the back.

With a hand that trembled with excitement Frelinghuysen drew from his wallet the two checks for ten thousand dollars apiece and placed them on the table.

"Out with your penny now. Shall I match you?" Escobedo asked.

"Yes, you match me," and getting the coin out he held it in his hand.

"If I match you the money is mine; if I fail it is yours."

"Yes, go it!"

"Open your hand!"

"Heads!" cried the young men in a breath.

Escobedo opened his hand.

"Heads!" again cried all of them.

"By Jove! you've won! Well, you ought to be right!" Frelinghuysen cried, drawing a long breath.

Before midnight this astonishing wager was the talk of the town.

CHAPTER XI.

A MYSTERIOUS SUMMONS.

THREE days after the night on which the events described in our last chapter took place, about ten o'clock in the morning, Escobedo and Ringwood were smoking their cigars in the hotel office.

During these three days no progress had been made by any one in solving the mysterious outrage which had been perpetrated on the Sheep-head Bay track.

Of course the detectives—that is some of them—talked wisely about "clues" and "being on the track," but Escobedo did not have any faith in their declarations.

"According to what I can find out these fellows, who talk so mysteriously, are the poorest ones of the lot," he remarked. "I do not take any stock in their declarations. They remind me of the sharps in the mining-camps who are always going to strike a rich lead and yet never succeed in doing it."

"I have been circulating around among the bookmakers and sporting men pretty freely, but have not been able to pick up a single thing about the affair. All the sharps are kicking themselves because they were not wise enough to foresee the trick, which cost you the race, and bet against your mount, for if the insiders had known that you had been booked to lose they could have milked the outside public to the tune of a good many thousand dollars," Ringwood remarked.

"Yes, no doubt; it is a very strange case."

The conversation at this point was interrupted by the appearance of a messenger boy who had a letter for Mr. Escobedo.

Jack opened and read the epistle, and then handed it to Ringwood—the messenger had not waited for an answer—saying:

"This is rather odd."

Dave Ringwood read the note aloud. It ran as follows:

"DEAR SIR:—I desire to see you on very important business. If you will have the kindness to come to Temple Court room No. 410, at two o'clock this afternoon you will find me in waiting. Pardon me if I refrain from signing my name, but there are important reasons why at present I should not do so. I assure you that the matter is an extremely important one to you and if you will have the kindness to come I am sure you will not regret it."

"Well, this is a most mysterious letter."

"Written in a back hand you notice, so as to disguise the handwriting?" Escobedo observed.

"Yes, the hand is evidently disguised."

"Do you know, Dave, I would be willing to lay a hundred to ten that this letter is a woman's composition!" exclaimed Escobedo, abruptly.

"Do you think so?" and Ringwood proceeded to examine the writing with a critical eye.

"Yes, I do indeed. I don't mean that a woman wrote it, although it looks more to me like a woman's handwriting than a man's, but there is a peculiarity about the wording of the letter which suggests a woman to me. The letter does not go straight to the point and there stop, as a man—particularly a business man—would write, but the writer uses a great many words and the last part of the note is but a repetition of the first; the adding of the postscript to the letter, usually a woman's custom."

"I think, Jack, that you would make a better detective than I, for you have jumped to a conclusion which did not strike me, but now that

you have called my attention to it I believe you are right."

"Let us find out what sort of a place this Temple Court is?" Escobedo remarked.

The hotel clerk gave the information. It was one of those colossal buildings down-town, devoted to offices and mainly occupied by lawyers.

"Will you go?" Ringwood asked as they turned away from the desk.

"Yes, I think so. It is possible that my offer of a thousand dollars reward is bearing fruit; some tool may be willing to betray his principal, and has chosen a lawyer to act as a go-between."

"It does seem likely."

And so, having come to this determination, the pair killed time until the hour for the interview approached.

Promptly to the minute, at two o'clock precisely, Escobedo and Ringwood stood before the door of Room 410, Temple Court.

On the glass of the door was the sign:

"ROBERT BURLINGAME,

"Attorney-at-Law."

"It is a lawyer's office, as I expected," Escobedo remarked.

"Well, let us go ahead and see what fate has in store for you," Dave Ringwood observed, in a jocular way.

The pair entered.

A little old man with iron-gray hair and a full beard was reading a newspaper by the window. A very respectable-looking old gentleman, who rose to receive his visitors with all the courtly grace of the old school of lawyers.

"My name is Escobedo," Jack said, plunging at once into business in his straightforward, go-ahead way, "and I have called in answer to a note requesting my presence here at two o'clock."

"Yes, sir; yes, sir, you are prompt to the minute," the old gentleman remarked, glancing at the clock ticking on the wall. "And promptness is a virtue which is not as common as it might be. Pardon the question, but is this gentleman with you?" he asked, with a polite bow to Ringwood.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, excuse me, but the party who wrote you the note wishes to speak to you alone."

"Doesn't desire witnesses, eh?"

"So I understand."

"Then you are not the party?"

"No, sir."

"Well, the matter is easily arranged. When your principal arrives my friend can retire."

"The party is already here, sir, and waiting for you in the room yonder," and the lawyer nodded to a door which evidently led to an inner apartment. "If you will have the kindness to enter, your friend can remain here."

"Certainly," Escobedo replied, while Ringwood accepted the chair toward which the lawyer waved his hand.

Opening the door, Jack Escobedo entered a room fully as large as the outer one, and, as he had expected, he found it occupied by a woman.

She sat at the further end of the apartment, was tall and well-formed, nicely dressed in dark clothes, but whether young or old was a mystery, for her face was concealed by a heavy, black veil, so dense that not a trace of the features below could be distinguished.

She waved her hand to a chair, placed upon the other side of the table by which she sat, when Escobedo made his appearance.

He closed the door after him, bowed and seated himself in the chair.

A keen observer, he had noted that the hand of the woman was small and neatly gloved, evidently the hand of a lady.

"Mr. Escobedo?" she said, in a tone of question, speaking in a low tone and very slowly, and the new-comer at once jumped to the conclusion that this was done to disguise her voice.

"Either I know her, or she fears I may recognize her hereafter," was the conclusion to which he immediately came.

"The same," he replied, in answer to the question.

"You received my letter, of course, or else you would not be here."

"Your conclusion, madam, is a logical one," he answered.

"I presume your curiosity has been excited, and you would like to know why you have been summoned to this interview."

"Yes, madam, quite correct," Escobedo said, with extreme politeness, and all the while he was watching the woman with the eyes of a hawk.

She was nervous—excited; he could tell that from the movement of her hands. Who was she and what had she to say?

With a sudden plunge, the mysterious woman broke the ice, so to speak.

"Sir, you were not always called Jack Escobedo!" she exclaimed abruptly.

The Fresh of Frisco was too old a gamester to allow his features to betray his thoughts, and so not a muscle of his face moved as he listened to the speech, and he was as calm and cool as usual as he replied:

"Madam, I am too well bred to contradict a lady, and as you speak with such a tone of con-

viction, I am satisfied that it would be a mere waste of breath for me to do so, even if I felt disposed."

"I could speak your true name if I chose to do so!" the woman declared, the nervous clutching of the hands plainly betraying that she was laboring under intense excitement.

The Fresh was a little puzzled; this was not at all what he expected, and he searched the chambers of his memory to discover where he had encountered this mysterious woman.

He had had many a flirtation on the Pacific Slope, but he could not identify this stranger with any of the ladies whose charms he had admired.

The woman is making a Judy of herself," was his mental remark.

"What on earth does she suppose I care if she does know that the Jack Escobedo of New York was in the wilds of the West known as Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, and did not have the best of reputations?"

His face did not betray the thoughts which were passing in his mind, for it was as a sealed book, wherein nothing could be read.

He nodded and said:

"Madam, I can assure you that I take but little interest in the matter. Whatever name, or names, I may have borne, Jack Escobedo is my present appellation, and the law of the State of Texas gives me the right to bear it."

"But the law of the State of Texas will not save you from punishment for crimes which you may have committed. The law punishes the man and not the name!" she exclaimed hastily.

CHAPTER XII.

A REVELATION.

THE Fresh was rather amazed at this outburst, but was too much master of himself to show it.

It was a complete surprise, of course, for he had come expecting to learn something in regard to the death of his horse; but, evidently, this party knew nothing whatever about that matter, and wanted to see him in reference to another subject altogether, but to what particular "crime" of his she referred was a mystery, and the thought came to him that anybody in the State of New York would not have an easy task in bringing him to punishment for any little peccadilloes which he might have committed on the Pacific Slope, or in the wilds of the far West.

"Madam, as I said before, I am too well-bred to contradict a lady," he responded with a polite bow. "And, therefore, your statement goes. The law does not punish the name, but the man: quite correct, as far as I know."

"You are taking this matter with wonderful coolness," she remarked, evidently amazed.

"Well, I really don't know in regard to that; as far as I can see there is nothing about the matter to cause me to become excited."

"Is the prospect of the State's Prison then a pleasant one to you?" the woman demanded, with a fierce accent.

"The State's Prison?" Escobedo exclaimed, and he bent an earnest glance upon the veiled woman as though he doubted if she knew what she was saying.

"Yes; do you not know that the doors of Sing Sing are even now opening to receive you?"

"No, I did not!" Escobedo replied, bluntly. "And, with all due respect to you, you will excuse me if I doubt the correctness of that statement. You may believe that it is the truth, but then, you know, we are all liable to make mistakes: this is an extremely uncertain world."

"You speak in a tone of banter, but I can assure you it is not a subject to jest upon!" the veiled woman exclaimed, sternly.

"Will you excuse me if I remark that I think you have made some mistake in this matter, and that I cannot conceive why the doors of Sing Sing, or any other prison, should be put to the necessity of opening on my account?"

"I see; it is your game to brazen the matter out. You think you cannot be identified, but you never made a greater mistake in your life! I wondered when I saw you that you dared to return to New York, even though years have elapsed, but I understand now. You have acquired wealth, and you think you can baffle the law, but you will find that money is not everything even in this corrupt city. There are plenty still living in New York who knew you and can identify you—I for one, for I could swear to you anywhere!"

And then, with a rapid motion, she threw the veil away from her face, revealing the features of a woman of thirty-eight or forty; a hard, resolute face, which would have been handsome had it not been for the hard lines upon it.

It was the woman who, in company with her father, the president of the Beaver National Bank, had sat in the grand stand on the day of the great match race and declared she recognized in Jack Escobedo a man who had once borne another name; it was the millionaire's daughter, Katherine Habersham.

The Fresh did not betray any emotion when the woman removed her veil and thus revealed her identity.

Of course it was no surprise to him, if he

knew the woman, for her words had prepared him for the disclosure.

"Ah, I did not hark back far enough," was the thought that came into his mind. "Ten or twelve years and the Pacific Slope was not ancient enough."

"Now then, George Hardy, will you deny that you are the man I take you to be?" Katherine exclaimed, fixing her brilliant black eyes full on his face.

"My name is Jack Escobedo, and though during a somewhat remarkable life in the West I may—like many another man—have borne other names, yet I am not inclined to be called to an account for it," he replied, firmly.

"With your career in the West, and what names you may have borne there, I have naught to do. It is of New York that I speak. Fifteen years ago you lived here and were called George Hardy; you were a clerk in the Beaver National Bank; you boarded at my father's house—he was a poor man then, and also a clerk in the bank—and you were my affianced husband, but you basely deserted me, robbed the bank and fled like a thief in the night!"

Escobedo listened, unmoved, to the accusation, but the face of the millionaire's daughter plainly showed how strong was the passion which raged within her bosom.

"Now, then, will you deny that you are George Hardy?" she exclaimed, finding that he was not disposed to speak.

"I will, most decidedly," he responded. "My name is Jack Escobedo, and that is the only one that I will answer to."

"Ah, you want war, then?"

"War?" he asked, in a tone of question.

"Yes, war!"

"No, I prefer peace; you will pardon me if I am rather dull of comprehension and fail to catch your meaning."

"Do you suppose that I am going to tamely submit to the wrong which you put upon me years ago?" she demanded, indignantly. "If I had had money then, as I have now, I would have followed you; but I was poor, compelled to work for my living, and so had to remain in New York, but as soon as my father became wealthy—I presume you know he is counted a millionaire now, and is the president of the bank in which he once drudged as a clerk on a miserable salary?"

"No, I do not know anything about your father."

"What I have said is the truth; any one will tell you that. As I said, when my father began to acquire wealth, and I had money to spare, I employed detectives to find you, but all my efforts were in vain and I believed you were dead. I still kept your memory green, though, and remained unmarried. I was your promised wife, and as your widow I mourned you. But now, I find you are alive; you come back here to New York rich and with a wife—another woman has taken my place, and you make a great mistake if you think I am going to tamely submit to such treatment!"

The woman had worked herself up into a perfect fury; her face was convulsed with passion, while lurid fires shot from her eyes.

"Gently, gently, my dear madam," the Fresh said, in his quiet way, "there isn't any necessity for this display of passion. If all you say be true, if I am the man you take me to be, it makes no difference; in the future we must be as strangers to each other, no matter what we may have been in the past."

"Oh, no; do not flatter yourself that I am going to be satisfied; I will not be trifled with in this way!" Katherine declared. "You promised me that I should be your wife years ago, and now I call upon you to redeem your pledge."

"You seem to forget that I am already married. We are not in the Mormon land where a man is allowed to have as many wives as he likes."

"Do you think I would consent to share you with any other woman?" she cried in scorn. "Oh, no; I have the best right to you and you must give up this other wife."

"Perhaps she will object to that," The Fresh suggested, a quiet smile on his lips.

"What do I care for her? You are mine, and you must get rid of her! Separation—divorces are easily obtained, particularly when the parties have plenty of money, so the matter can be easily arranged."

"But suppose I don't want to arrange the matter in that way?" The Fresh asked.

"If you reject my love you must beware of my vengeance!" the woman answered with firm determination.

"Well, now, I hate to quarrel with a woman, but in this matter I am between two horns of a dilemma. I have either got to wreck the life of an innocent girl or fight you."

"Did you not wreck my life?" she demanded fiercely.

"No," he replied, firmly. "I will assume, for the sake of argument, that I am the man you take me to be. Fifteen years ago we were both too young to know our own minds. It was a boy and girl's love; we were thrown together and the engagement came almost before we knew what we were about. Then circumstances forced me to leave New York."

"When I got away from you I soon discovered that I did not care for you as a man ought to care for a woman with whom he is to pass all his future life, and I thought it extremely lucky, both for you and myself, that the discovery was made before marriage rather than after it."

The lips of the woman curled in contempt.

"Do you think I am going to be satisfied with such a paltry explanation as this?" she exclaimed.

"Well, you ought to be if you have got any reason about you!" he retorted.

"I am not! Nothing but you for my husband will satisfy me!"

"It is impossible, and you might as well give up the idea."

"Then I will ruin you!" she hissed in firm determination.

"Oh, no, you can't do it."

"Yes, I can; I will denounce you to the officers of the bank as the George Hardy who robbed the institution and fled with his spoils fifteen years ago!"

"Well, now I don't think you will make much by trying that game," The Fresh remarked, placidly. "In the first place you will have to identify me and prove that I am the man, and men change materially in fifteen years. Then, as I have plenty of money, I can make a good fight, and for that matter, rather than be bothered, I will say to the bank officials, I am not the man, but I will pay back the sum rather than be troubled. Don't you think they will gladly take the money?"

CHAPTER XIII.

ASTONISHING NEWS.

THE Fresh had made a strong point and for a moment the woman hesitated, but quickly recovering herself, she cried:

"No, they will not take the offer!"

"Excuse me if I differ with you in regard to that matter. I think they will."

"And I am certain that they will not!" Katherine declared. "You seem to forget that my father is now president of the bank and he will heed my request to prosecute you to the full extent of the law."

The Fresh did not seem to be at all alarmed by this threat; on the contrary, a quiet, sarcastic smile appeared on his face and he said:

"When you have had a talk with your father in regard to this matter perhaps you will change your mind. It is my opinion that he will not care to rake up this old matter, but will be glad to take from me the sum of which the bank was robbed and allow the affair to drop."

"No, no, you are wrong, he will do as I say!" the woman declared. "I understood that you are a wealthy man, and it is apparent that you do not set much value on your money or you would not be willing to yield so large a sum without a struggle."

For the first time a look of surprise appeared on Escobedo's face, and he glanced earnestly at the woman as if wishing to assure himself that she was not speaking in banter, but it was plain that she meant what she said.

"Well, it may be possible that the sum looks large to you, but I can assure you that I consider it a mere trifle, and that is why I think the bank people will be glad to take the money and allow the affair to be hushed up."

"If you are so wealthy that such a sum is a mere trifle to you, then the bank will be sure to get the money anyway, and on the board of directors are some men who believe that rascals ought to be punished; I am certain that when they learn you are within the reach of the law they will not suffer you to escape!" exclaimed Katherine in the most vindictive manner possible.

"It will have to be war then I suppose, for I do not intend to yield to your demand, so go ahead as soon as you like."

"Is this your decision?"

"It is!"

"Be it so, and before you are twenty hours older you will find that my threats are not empty ones."

"Go ahead as soon as you like!" the Fresh replied, carelessly. "But I think you will discover that when the bank people learn that I am ready to draw my check at a moment's notice for the paltry sum which they lost fifteen years ago, they will not be anxious to drag me into court."

"You have very strange ideas of the value of money!" the woman exclaimed in amazement.

"I think I know the value of it as well as anybody."

"Ah, I suppose you have not calculated that the bank will demand fifteen years' interest in addition to the principal!" she cried, as the thought came to her.

"I presume the money sharks will do their best to get all the cash possible out of me, but with the interest the sum will not be more than doubled, and what is a sum like three thousand dollars to a man like myself?" the Fresh remarked with the air of a philosopher.

"Three thousand dollars!" the woman exclaimed in extreme astonishment.

"Yes, that is double the amount that the bank lost fifteen years ago. The shortage in the accounts was two thousand dollars, and when the misguided clerk fled, leaving a letter behind him in which he confessed that he had yielded to temptation and used the funds of the bank, he made over his bank-book, containing a credit of about five hundred dollars which reduces the shortage to fifteen hundred. And from the way things have turned out it seems to me now that that was about the most stupid move that ever a man made in this world."

"You are talking utter nonsense!" the woman declared. "Three thousand dollars is nothing! If it was such a trifle as that no doubt a compromise could be effected, but the sum that you stole from the bank was eighty thousand dollars, which with the interest would now amount to about one hundred and fifty thousand!"

The Fresh fairly stared at the woman for a few moments, as if he had an idea that she had suddenly gone crazy.

"As the boys say, 'what are you giving me?'" he exclaimed. "Eighty thousand dollars! Oh, no, nothing of the kind!"

"I do not comprehend what you can gain by attempting to deny the truth!" she said, apparently puzzled.

"But it is not the truth!" the Fresh retorted. "Why, if the bank had been robbed of any such sum as that it would have moved heaven and earth to overtake and capture the robber."

"The full extent of the loss was not discovered until a week after your flight. It was at first supposed that a couple of thousand dollars would cover the loss, that is all the books showed, but when a week after your disappearance the officers of the bank had occasion to examine their United States bonds, in which they dealt largely, they found that one package which should have contained a hundred thousand dollars was eighty thousand short. The bonds had been abstracted and in their place was waste paper, the package so skillfully arranged that the deception could only be discovered upon a close examination."

There was a peculiar look upon Escobedo's face, and he fixed his eyes searchingly upon the woman.

"Is this really the truth that you are telling me?" he asked.

It was now Katherine's turn to look surprised.

"Most certainly it is; why should I attempt to tell you a lie? Deception would be useless, for the moment you are arrested the truth would come out."

"The bank wants then a hundred and fifty thousand dollars out of this George Hardy who absconded fifteen years ago," the Fresh remarked in a reflective way.

"Yes, and I think that sum will not be considered a trifle even by a man who bears the reputation of being as wealthy as yourself!" Katherine exclaimed, vindictively.

"Oh, no, a hundred and fifty thousand dollars is no joke even to a millionaire."

"You had better accept my offer then!" the woman exclaimed, eagerly.

"Oh, no, if I am George Hardy I had a durned narrow escape, and it was a good thing for me that I absconded; from this specimen of your qualities it is apparent that the man who marries you will be apt to have a lively time of it," the Fresh remarked with a frankness that irritated the woman dreadfully.

"It is your fault if I am changed from a loving woman into a revengeful devil!" she declared.

"It will not profit us much to discuss the subject," he remarked. "But now let me give you a word of advice. I can see that you are inclined to be extremely rash and impetuous in this matter; now take time to consider it; do not be hasty, and above all things consult your father; tell him exactly what you intend to do and see what he says about it. He is older than you—a business man, who has seen a deal of the world, and he will be able to give you good advice."

"I am a woman and, of course, know nothing at all about business!" Katherine exclaimed in an extremely sarcastic way. "It will be an easy matter for an old and experienced man of the world, like yourself, to get the best of me in a contest of this kind. Your advice to ask my father's counsel before I proceed to action may be very good, but I do not intend to do anything of the kind. I do not intend to give you any chance to escape. I understand your plan; while I delay my scheme of vengeance to ask my father's advice you will take advantage of the opportunity to escape!"

"Oh, no, you are wrong there; no such idea was in my mind!" the Fresh declared.

"Of course you will deny it; that is to be expected. You would be very foolish indeed to reveal your plan of operations to me, but I can assure you that I do not intend to throw a single chance away. I give you now your last opportunity to escape the doom which my hand will bring upon you. You shall have time for reflection—all you wish, but you must come to a decision before you leave this room."

"I am very much obliged to you but I can give you an answer as well now, right on the

spur of the moment, as though I had six months to think it over," he rejoined.

"Your fate be on your own head then!" she exclaimed, terribly excited and evidently much disappointed by his firm refusal. "I would have saved you, but since you reject my love I will have vengeance!"

And then she struck a call-bell which was on the table; hardly had the bell sounded when it was answered by a bell in the outer apartment.

The woman sprung to her feet, the Fresh also rose.

He understood that these signals had been arranged in advance.

Katherine advanced to the door and flung it open.

At the entrance stood the old lawyer and two muscular, resolute-looking men, one of whom held a legal-like document in his hand.

Escobedo understood the situation in a moment.

These men were officers who had been in waiting in the entry, and the taps upon the bell had summoned them into the apartment.

Dave Ringwood had sprung to his feet and was regarding the scene with utter amazement, for being utterly in the dark as to the interview between the two in the inner room, he was taken completely by surprise by the abrupt entrance of the officers.

"This is the man, officer!" Katherine exclaimed, pointing with outstretched finger to Jack Escobedo.

"I will have to trouble you to come with me, sir," the foremost man said, in a civil way. "We are detective officers, and have a warrant for your arrest."

And then the two threw open their coats, displaying their stars.

The Fresh was as cool as though to be placed under arrest was an every-day occurrence.

"Isn't there some mistake about this matter?" he asked.

"I think not, sir," the detective replied.

"Can I examine the warrant?"

"Certainly, sir."

"This calls for the arrest of one George Hardy," the Fresh observed, after reading the paper.

"Yes, and I identify you as George Hardy!" Katherine Habersham cried, excitedly. "Take him away at once, officer!"

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE TOMBS.

THE detective—it was Detective Skelly, one of the best men on the New York force—did not relish the commanding way in which the woman spoke, and was not at all inclined to be ordered about by her.

"There is no hurry, madam; the gentleman can take his own time," he said, shortly.

"Officer, suppose that I deny that I am the man called for in this warrant, George Hardy?" the Fresh asked.

"I am aware that you do not go by that name," the detective admitted. "I was on the track at Sheephead Bay and saw you ride your great match race, Mr. Escobedo, but this lady has made affidavit that you are George Hardy, the party called for in the warrant, and you will be obliged to go before a magistrate for an examination."

"Ah, yes, I see. Where will you take me?"

"To the Tombs."

"I ought to have counsel, I presume?"

"I should certainly advise it, sir, for the charge is a serious one, one hundred and fifty thousand dollars being involved," the detective remarked, with a glance at the warrant which the Fresh returned to him at that moment.

"I reckon I will have to trespass upon your kindness for advice in this matter," the Fresh remarked. "My acquaintance with New York lawyers is limited, and I must ask you to recommend one."

"Certainly! take Have and Humpit; their office is right by the Tombs, and they stand at the top of the heap in criminal cases. They come high, but that is the kind you want."

"Yes, no doubt. Dave, attend to this matter for me," said Escobedo.

"Immediately!" and Ringwood departed on the instant; caught the elevator as it was descending—the lawyer's office was away at the top of the house—got a cab in the street, and five minutes later was in the office of the most celebrated criminal lawyers in New York.

Quick work! But Dave Ringwood was a man of action, and did not intend that the opposing side should get a chance to retain the lawyers before they accepted a fee from him.

"I am ready to go with you, and I am much obliged for your kindness, officer," Escobedo remarked, after Ringwood's departure.

"Don't mention it, sir; always glad to oblige a gentleman when I can."

Then the detective moved toward the door, the Fresh followed, while the other officer brought up the rear.

"But, officer, is it not necessary to handcuff the prisoner?" Katherine exclaimed. "He may succeed in giving you the slip and escape on the way."

Now that the prey was secured, she was fear-

ful lest by some lucky chance he might succeed in breaking through the snare in which she had succeeded in entangling him.

"I give you my word as a gentleman, officer, that I shall not attempt to escape," the Fresh hastened to say, for he did not relish the idea of being paraded through the streets of New York with his wrists adorned with handcuffs.

"Oh, that is all right, sir; I think I know a gentleman when I see one," the detective replied, resenting the interference of the woman. "I have a hack in the street. I presumed you would prefer to go in a hack."

"Much obliged. Will a couple of dollars be enough?" and the Fresh drew that amount from his wallet.

"That will be about the figure."

Then they all descended to the street.

The hack of the detectives was at the door, and just above it was the coupe of Miss Habersham.

The detectives with their prisoner got into the hack, Miss Habersham and the old lawyer into the coupe, and in due time all arrived at that gloomy stone temple of Justice on Centre street, known far and wide as the Tombs.

Judge Duffy—the little judge, as he is popularly called—was on the bench that day, and as he had had an unusually long docket, was just at the end of it when the party arrived.

Dave Ringwood was in the court room waiting for his friend, accompanied by Lawyer Have, the senior member of the firm of Have & Humpit.

The lawyer was a portly, well-preserved man, with a commanding presence; "the lilies of the field" were not more gorgeous in their attire than he, and in his snowy-shirt bosom sparkled a diamond, so large, that in the slang of the day such ornaments are usually called headlights.

Escobedo was introduced by Ringwood to the lawyer, and then the judge gave his attention to the case.

The detective recited the circumstances of the arrest, and the judge after taking a look at the papers asked if the district attorney was represented.

"We have not yet notified him of the case," the detective remarked.

Then Lawyer Have got on his legs.

"I appear for this gentleman, your Honor," he said. "This is a case of mistaken identity. This gentleman is Mr. Jack Escobedo, and is no more the George Hardy called for in this warrant than I am, and therefore, your Honor, we are desirous of an examination as speedily as possible."

"Certainly," said the magistrate, with a curious glance at the prisoner.

The judge had seen the gentleman on the race track and had also heard the particulars of his wonderful wager when he had placed twenty thousand dollars upon a single hazard of the die.

"The case seems to be an important one, as no less a sum than one hundred and fifty thousand dollars is involved. The district attorney's office must be represented, and I presume the Beaver National Bank, which is the complaining party, will also desire to be represented by counsel."

"Well, your Honor, I should think, that, under the circumstances, to set the examination for to-morrow morning would give all parties ample time to prepare," Lawyer Have observed, in his dignified way. "Knowing as I do that my client has a perfect defense, and that a more ridiculous charge against an innocent man was never brought into a court room since the world began, I am desirous that my client shall not rest under this base imputation a moment longer than is absolutely necessary."

"To-morrow morning will answer," said the judge, who was decidedly inclined to believe that there was some mistake about the matter.

"How about bail, your Honor?" asked the lawyer, in his smoothest tones.

Judge Duffy shook his head.

"Impossible to accept bail until the examination. These papers make out a strong case—"

"Ex parte of course, your Honor."

"Certainly, but on their face, I wouldn't feel justified in taking bail until the bank and the district attorney both are represented. It will be for a brief period only, and every citizen must expect to be incommoded sometimes if the ends of justice are thereby satisfied."

"I bow to your Honor's decision," said the lawyer, with a really magnificent salute. "To-morrow we will show that this flimsy charge will not hold water."

And so the prisoner was committed to the Tombs, and then the judge adjourned the court.

This brief examination took place in time for the evening journals to get a full account of the affair, and a full column article the enterprising reporters made of it.

All New York was amazed, particularly the sporting fraternity, and the young up-town bloods who were acquainted with the hero of the affair.

"Do you believe it can be possible?" was the general cry.

Was Jack Escobedo, the Texan cattle king, the millionaire three times over, the light-finger bank clerk who absconded from New York fif-

teen years ago with eighty thousand dollars belonging to the Beaver National Bank?

It seemed more like a romance than a reality—a page out of a sensational novel—and there was a general expression of doubt.

Lawyer Have, in his grandiloquent way, had struck the key-note.

A case of mistaken identity!

And the betting men of the metropolis—there are men in New York who are prepared to bet on anything—offered odds of two to one that Jack Escobedo would get out of it, no matter whether he was the man or not.

Justice in great Gotham has so frequently miscarried that it is difficult to convince the average man that a chap with three millions of dollars cannot commit any crime in the calendar and escape punishment by hook or by crook.

But, oh! how swiftly the sword descends when there is no gold to bar the way!

CHAPTER XV.

THE BANK PRESIDENT.

THERE was a cozy little party in one of the private rooms of Delmonico's down-town restaurant, the popular resort for the money kings of Wall street.

Here a dozen prominent Wall street men were having dinner in company, and the Beaver National Bank was represented by its president, Anson Habersham, and its vice-president, Dionysius Soaper.

The president we have already introduced to the reader; the vice was a short, fat man of sixty or thereabouts, with a round, fat face, which, although it was not ill-looking, somehow suggested the swine family. He was completely bald, the only hair he could boast of being a thin fringe which started at the ears and ran around the back of his neck.

Soaper was rich, having inherited a fortune from his father, a real estate lawyer, and the real founder of the Beaver Bank, with which the son had also been connected in some capacity ever since he was big enough to figure in commercial life.

Soaper and Habersham were chums, residing in adjoining houses on Fifth avenue, and it was an open secret to those well acquainted with Soaper that for years he had been a suitor for the hand of Katherine Habersham, but although Soaper, despite his years, was considered an extremely desirable "catch"—so wealthy men are usually rated in the parlance of the fashionable world, even though they be old and as ugly as sin—yet Katherine did not seem inclined to favor his suit, although she was on the best of terms with him and allowed Mr. Soaper to monopolize her with his attentions in such a way that no other swain had a chance, much to the disgust of many a young blood, who would have been glad to capture the dashing heiress, and the extremely large fortune which she was sure some day to have, being her father's sole heir, for although Anson Habersham, when a poor man, had a large family, yet, as he rose to wealth, fate took his children from him, just as though Dame Fortune had made up her mind that he needed some reverses to remember him that he was but mortal. Just as the Roman conquerors had a slave beside them when they entered the empire city upon their return from victory to whisper in their ears, "Remember, oh Caesar, that thou art but a man!"

At the end of the dinner the party descended to the street.

Soaper's carriage was at the door; and he and Habersham entered it.

Just then a boy came along, yelling at the top of his lungs:

"Hyer's yer extra! another big Wall street robber caught!"

A peculiar light shone in Mr. Soaper's little, pig-like eyes and a grin spread over his fat face.

"Aha! we must see what all this is about!" he exclaimed.

Then he hailed the boy and bought a paper. Away the carriage rolled and Soaper glanced over the article which bore the glowing headline:

AN IMPORTANT ARREST.

"Well, what is it now?" Habersham asked.

"George Hardy is caught!" the other replied, abruptly.

The president gave a gasp as though his breath had suddenly deserted him; he was leaning well back in the corner and so supported that even if he had fainted, he could not have fallen, and from the deadly whiteness of his face it really seemed as if he had been taken suddenly ill.

Soaper, busily engaged in reading the account, did not notice the effect that his words had produced, and in a few moments Habersham recovered from the spasm which had so suddenly seized upon him.

"By George! to think that after all these years the fellow should be caught!" Soaper exclaimed when he came to the end of the article. "You remember George Hardy, of course?"

"Oh, yes."

"You have most cause to remember him, for the fellow nearly killed you."

"Yes, I shall never forget that night of agony,

as I lay in the bank, bound and helpless," the bank president remarked with a solemn shake of the head. "I thought the morning light would never come as I watched the windows, anxious to discover the first gray streaks of the dawn."

"It was really a wonderful thing that you did not die before assistance came."

"Yes, indeed."

"The fellow is caught at last—right here in New York too, passing under another name, and he has plenty of money now—very rich; that is, he is supposed to be, and there is a fine chance that the bank will get back every cent the rascal took, aha!" and the vice-president rubbed his fat hands together, gleefully.

"That will be good."

"And you will never guess how the arrest came about!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes, he, he, he! the last person in the world whom you would suspect—your daughter, Katherine!"

"That is surprising!" but though Habersham attempted to put on a look of amazement, it was hardly a success.

But Soaper was not a man who had ever been noted for his penetration and so he went on without noticing how ill at ease the bank president seemed to be.

"Yes, your daughter; she saw the fellow at the Sheepshead Bay meeting—he rode a match race there—and she recognized him immediately."

"Yes, I remember she told me she thought a gentleman there was George Hardy, but I was inclined to think she was wrong, for to me his face did not seem familiar."

"Ah, yes, she related the circumstance to me, but as she said she was not sure whether it was the man or not—your doubt you see, made her uncertain—she did not tell me where she saw the fellow. She asked my advice about the matter, and also asked me if I thought I would remember George Hardy if he had not changed much, and I immediately told her that I was sure I would recognize the scoundrel anywhere! You see there was a little circumstance connected with my last interview with him—on the very day on the night of which he fled—which would serve to keep the rascal fresh in my mind as long as I live."

"If you remember, at that time he was boarding at your house."

"Yes, I recollect."

"Well, I had a notion for your daughter, Katherine and I think she would have looked with a favorable eye upon my suit if it had not been for this rascal of a Hardy, who, you will recall, had a very plausible, taking way with him."

"Yes, yes."

"I was warned by a friend of what was going on, and so I took occasion to speak to Hardy in private about the matter. I was cashier of the bank at the time, you recollect."

The other nodded.

"I spoke rather sharply to the fellow, for I thought it monstrous that a rascal with nothing but a beggarly salary to depend upon should attempt to set up as a rival to a man like myself."

Again the other nodded.

"Well, sir, he was as impudent as a lord, and we had some pretty hot words, and—would you believe it? the scoundrel had the audacity to take me by the nose and pulled it, sir, too, in the most outrageous manner!"

"Hardy was always inclined to be hot-tempered and violent."

"Now, I will get a chance to settle that old account!" Soaper declared.

"When your daughter asked my advice about the matter, I told her I was certain I would be able to identify the man, and that by all means she must ascertain if it was George Hardy. She said she would, but she begged me not to speak of the matter to any one, not even to you, until she ascertained the truth beyond a doubt."

"Yes, I understand; I did not think it was George Hardy, and advised her not to disturb herself about the matter."

"Ah, my dear Habersham, you are entirely too easy about these matters!" the other exclaimed. "It is a duty that we bank people owe to each other, and to the community at large, to hunt down any rascals who attempt to prey upon us, even if we have to run them to the very ends of the earth. Never have the least bit of mercy upon them. Let everybody understand that no matter what extenuating circumstances there may be about the case, it will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, and then scoundrels would be apt to be careful about touching our funds."

"Yes, I believe you are right," Habersham remarked, rousing himself with an effort from the abstraction into which he had fallen.

"Now, in this case we mustn't show any mercy to the rascal. I instructed your daughter that the moment she was sure this party was George Hardy, to make an affidavit to that effect, and have him arrested. I explained to her how necessary it was to act promptly, for with such a slippery customer, if he had any chance, he would be off, and then we might not be able to lay him by the heels."

"Yes, undoubtedly."

"From this article I can see that she has followed my advice to the letter," Soaper remarked, with a deal of satisfaction. "He is safe in the Tombs and if we push it, the chances are great that we can send him to Sing Sing for almost ten years."

"Yes, the rascal must be punished!" the bank president cried with sudden determination.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAWYER CALLS.

UPON arriving at his palace-like brown-stone mansion on Fifth avenue, Mr. Habersham found his daughter in the parlor, deeply interested in the article wherein the arrest of Jack Escobedo was described.

The "extra fiend" had just passed through the street, and Katherine hastened to procure a paper.

"I suppose you have heard the news downtown?" she exclaimed, as the bank president entered.

"Oh, yes, Soaper got a paper just as we started; we come up together, as usual."

By this time Habersham had resumed his usual bearing; no shade was on his face as he took his customary seat in an easy-chair by the window.

"You must forgive me, father, for acting in this matter without your knowledge," the daughter said, taking a seat on a low ottoman by his side, and resting her hands upon his arm.

"Well, haven't you been a little hasty?"

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, decidedly. "There isn't any doubt about the matter. It is George Hardy! By means of a decoy letter I got him to come to Mr. Burlingame's office downtown, and there I had a long interview with him."

"It seems to me that you have acted very strangely in the matter," the bank president remarked.

"Father, this George Hardy is the only man in this world that I have ever loved!" she exclaimed. "I gave my heart to him long before he went away, and although there never was any real marriage engagement between us, yet it was understood by both that we were to be married some day, when his circumstances were such as to warrant him in taking a wife."

"I have been faithful to his memory all these years, but he has forgotten the love which he once had for me. I had this interview with him for the purpose of asking if he had returned to New York with the intention of keeping faith with me."

"My child, it seems to me that I heard he has a wife!" the father exclaimed.

"Yes, that is the truth; but I did not care if he had fifty wives, so long as he was willing to give them up and take me."

"Oh, this is madness!"

"Yes, as far as he is concerned I am mad," the girl declared.

"But you must not do such a thing."

"I cannot do it—the man despises my love, for when I told him that if he rejected me I would denounce and send him to Sing Sing, he defied me."

"It is much the best that it should be that way."

"I did denounce him, and he is arrested, as you have read; but, father, when I threatened him he advised me to see you, and ask your counsel in the matter before proceeding to extremities. I could see that he expected you would advise me not to push the charge."

"I really don't understand that!" Habersham exclaimed, appearing to be puzzled.

"He might have thought that I would have advised you not to appear in the matter, but as I, or the bank, would take it up, his position would not have been altered. At Sheepshead Bay, when you said you recognized him, I advised you not to trouble yourself; for as the man's face did not seem to be at all familiar to me I thought you had made a mistake, but I have been thinking over the affair, and gradually Hardy's face has come back to me; you are right in your belief—it is George Hardy."

"And you will prosecute him?" the woman inquired, eagerly.

"To the fullest extent of the law!" the bank president replied, firmly.

"Ah, that will be good!" Katherine exclaimed, a fierce expression on her features. "You will not be easy with him, even if the stolen money is refunded?"

"Oh, no, it is too late, now. I am not generally disposed to be harsh, but in this matter, for your sake, I will demand that ample justice be meted out to him!"

"Yes, then my vengeance will be satisfied."

"Even if I were disposed to let up on Hardy, to use the common phrase, I could not do so, for the affair is out of my hands now; he is in the gripe of the law which he outraged, and to that law he must answer."

"The State Prison for fully ten years, will be the sentence, I am told."

"I presume some such punishment will be given him. It was an enormous sum of money that he stole, and the magnitude of the crime demands severe punishment. You have interested Soaper in the case, and as he has a grudge against Hardy, he will do all in his power

to have a heavy sentence inflicted upon him. Men like Soaper have a deal of influence and public sentiment in a case of this kind, often sways a judge, even without his knowledge. Soaper will be sure to raise a popular clamor for a heavy punishment, and you can depend upon it that Hardy will be apt—if convicted, of which there can be no doubt—of getting as heavy a sentence as the law allows."

"My love now has all turned to hate, and since he has repulsed me, and defied my power, I will do my utmost to crush him to the very earth."

"We must keep this matter quiet and not allow it to get out," the bank president continued, "for if it were known why you came to denounce him, it would cause a deal of unpleasant gossip."

"Oh, you may trust me to keep the secret, and no one but George Hardy and myself know aught of the matter."

"When he finds that I am determined to prosecute him he may, in his anger, give the story to the public," Habersham suggested.

"Oh, that is possible; when a man is hunted into a corner, he is apt to use any weapon which he can grasp, but I shall deny the tale, of course, and with such natural indignation, too, that not one out of a thousand will believe there is any truth in it," Katherine remarked, with a contemptuous smile upon her proud features. "Such a statement, coming from a man with the State Prison staring him in the face, will be regarded as the malice of an impotent criminal."

"Very true!" the father exclaimed. "No one of sense would believe any statement that such a man might make."

The conversation at this point was interrupted by the appearance of a servant with a card.

"A gentlemen would like to see you, sir," he announced.

The bank president took the card.

"W. Have. Have and Humpit?" he said in a tone of question.

A look of surprise appeared on the face of Katherine.

"Why, that is the lawyer who has been retained to defend this man Hardy!" she exclaimed.

"Is it possible?" and a slight expression of annoyance showed on Habersham's features.

"Yes, when he was arrested he asked the detective's advice in regard to a lawyer, and the man recommended this firm, and when he was arraigned before the police magistrate this Mr. Have appeared for him."

"I do not understand why the man wishes to see me."

"Perhaps for the purpose of ascertaining if the bank intends to prosecute," the daughter suggested.

"Ah, yes, that may be it."

"Or, possibly, he comes with the idea of suggesting a compromise. Now that Hardy finds he is fairly in the toils he may have come to the conclusion that he will make restitution, and hopes that if he does so the bank will not push the case. They say that he is a very rich man now, and though a hundred and fifty thousand dollars is a large sum, still if a man is rich enough to pay the money it is better than going to jail for a long term of years."

"Very true; few men would hesitate to save themselves from Sing Sing by adopting such a course. Show him in, Thomas."

The servant departed.

"Shall I retire, father?" Katherine asked.

"No, I do not see any necessity for that," Habersham replied. "There will be nothing private about the matter. I cannot give the man any information; the entire direction of the affair is not in my hands; there will have to be a meeting of the bank officers and a consultation."

At this point the portly lawyer was ushered into the room.

Now that he had had time to think about the matter the bank president recalled the lawyer and his peculiar importance although he had never chanced to encounter him before, so he received him politely, had the servant offer a chair and did his best to place the visitor at his ease.

"I have never had the pleasure of meeting you personally, Mr. Have, but you are quite well-known to me by reputation," Mr. Habersham observed.

The lawyer bowed, and then he cast an inquiring glance at Katherine.

"My daughter, sir," the bank president hastened to say, understanding the meaning of the look. "You need not hesitate to speak before her. She acts as my secretary and is familiar with my business affairs."

"I envy you, Mr. Habersham," the lawyer remarked with a courtly bow to the lady. "There are not many business men in New York who can boast of such a charming assistant."

"You are disposed to flatter, Mr. Have," Katherine observed, acknowledging the compliment with a brilliant smile.

"Oh, no, it is the sober, unvarnished truth; you can always depend upon getting that from

a lawyer, you know," Mr. Have replied with another bow.

"Oh, yes, of course," the bank president remarked.

And then they all laughed.

"I called to see you on a little matter of business," the lawyer explained, "and I trust your daughter will not think I am discourteous if I request the favor of a private interview."

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Katherine rising.

"I am not acting for myself, Miss Habersham, and, of course, have to comply with the ideas of the party I represent. I should be charmed to have you present."

The lady smiled and then departed.

An odd look came in Habersham's eyes as he gazed upon his visitor.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRISONER'S STORY.

WHEN the rustle of Miss Habersham's dress died away in the entry, Lawyer Have turned an inquiring gaze upon the bank president and looked as if he expected him to say something; Habersham returned the look with interest.

Finding that his host was not disposed to speak the lawyer said:

"Oh, by the by, I neglected to mention that in this George Hardy case, my firm has been retained by the prisoner."

"I was aware of the fact."

And then there was another brief silence, broken by the lawyer asking:

"Well, is there any thing you wish to say to me in regard to the case?"

The face of the bank president assumed an expression of complete surprise; and he leaned back in his chair, surveying the lawyer with wonder.

And Mr. Have, on his part, seemed as if he did not know what to make of it.

"I do not understand this at all!" the bank president exclaimed at last. "Why do you assume that I wanted to say something to you about this matter?"

"I do not assume anything of the kind, bless you!" the lawyer replied. "That is I mean, I, in person; I am only acting for my client."

"I am afraid I am rather dull of comprehension for I do not understand why any one should think I wanted to talk to you about the matter—or any one else."

"Well, I am just as much in the dark as you seem to be!" exclaimed Have, evidently very much puzzled.

"A few words will explain though," he continued. "As you are aware I have been retained by the prisoner. After his arrest to-day we had a brief conversation, but as neither the district attorney, nor the Beaver National Bank, whose money he is accused of taking, were represented, the case was postponed until to-morrow."

After the examination I sought my client for the purpose of holding a conversation with him, but, to my surprise, he was averse to talking about the case, and said before he entered into particulars he wanted me to call upon you and see what you had to say about the matter. It was an extremely odd request—the oddest I think that was ever made to me in the whole course of my professional experience," the lawyer added, caressing his fat chin in a reflective sort-of-way. "But he was so earnest in the matter that I consented, for I thought there must be some good reason for the request, or else he would not urge it so strongly."

"I am utterly in the dark, sir, in regard to the matter," the bank president remarked, without hesitation. "I know of no reason why he should have sent you to me."

"Of course, Mr. Have, you are aware that the disposal of the affair does not lie in my hands at all; I am the president of the bank it is true, but we have a board of directors who sway the policy of the institution, so, if your client wanted you to call on me with the idea that I could make any arrangement of the matter, or suggest any mode of settlement, he must be strangely ignorant of the way we do business in New York."

"Well, I can assure you, Mr. Habersham, I know no more about the matter than you do. He gave me no clew as to his reason for the request. All he said was: 'Before I talk to you about this case, I want you to call upon Mr. Anson Habersham, the president of the Beaver National Bank and say to him that I do not care to talk about the affair even with my own lawyer until I hear what he has got to say about it.'"

"I think the man must be out of his mind!" Habersham exclaimed. "I have nothing to say! I shall send word to our directors to-night and call a meeting to-morrow morning to discuss the case, and during that meeting the policy of the bank will be decided upon—I presume there is no doubt that this man is the George Hardy who robbed the bank fifteen years ago?"

"My dear Mr. Habersham, to my thinking there is considerably doubt about the matter," the lawyer replied, in his blandest way, "but I know you will agree with me that it would simply be a waste of time for us to discuss the matter."

"Yes, yes, true," the other remarked. "But what I was going to say is, that if it is George Hardy, to my thinking there is little doubt that

the bank will push the matter to the furthest extremity, and though in such affairs I have always been in favor of being merciful, provided the bank was made whole and the culprit seemed to be penitent, yet, knowing the disposition of the majority of the directors as I do, it is my firm belief—no matter what course this man may adopt—that he need expect no mercy."

"The bank people have always been very sore over this colossal robbery, and now that the robber is captured, undoubtedly he will be made an example of as a warning to others."

The lawyer rose.

"Well, I am really sorry for having taken up your time, Mr. Habersham," he observed. "Particularly as it has served no good purpose; but I assure you I would not have come if I had not thought from my client's manner that it was important that I should do so."

And then Mr. Have took his departure.

"I must see Escobedo the first thing in the morning," he murmured, as he walked down the street. "Hang me if this isn't about the most mysterious affair that I ever had a hand in!"

The lawyer acted up to his resolution.

He came down-town earlier than usual and called upon Jack Escobedo in his cell within the Tombs.

The prisoner surrendered the stool to the lawyer and took a seat upon his bed.

"Well, Mr. Escobedo, you sent me on a kind of a fool's errand yesterday," he observed. "And you must not be surprised if I put in a pretty heavy bill for it."

"Oh, that is all right; we will not quarrel in regard to that," the Fresh replied. "I gather from your words that Mr. Anson Habersham was not inclined to talk about my case?"

"Indeed he said he knew nothing about it, and was extremely surprised that you should send me to him."

"Yes?"

"That is the way he talked. Of course I was completely in the dark as to your motives and told him so. He guessed that, possibly, you wanted to learn what he intended doing in the matter, and so took pains to explain that he did not control the affair, the bank's board of directors do that, and he said, frankly, that while he was always in favor of mercy, under extenuating circumstances, yet, in this case, even if the money was paid back to the bank, he did not think you need expect any."

"That was frank," the Fresh remarked, with a peculiar look in his clear eyes.

"Yes, and now to business; your examination takes place in a few hours, and we must be prepared for it."

"All right; I am ready to speak now and you shall have a full history of the affair."

"Eh?" exclaimed Have, a little astonished, "is it possible that you are the man?"

"Yes, I am the George Hardy who left New York 'between two days,' some fifteen years ago."

"Well, really now, I did not think that. I thought the parties had made a mistake in regard to your identity."

"No, I am the man."

"Since it is so, it was wise in you to confide the fact to me. A man mustn't attempt to fool his lawyer any more than he would his doctor," the counselor remarked. "When a fellow gets into a scrape and calls upon a lawyer to help him out and then does not tell him the exact truth, he sends his advocate into the fight badly prepared for war."

"Well, Mr. Have, the story I am about to tell is a strange one, but every word is true."

"Fire away!"

"My name is George Hardy, and fifteen years ago I was a clerk in the Beaver National Bank. I was an orphan, and, in fact, without a single relative in the world. I entered the bank as an errand boy and rose to be a clerk. I boarded with one of the bank employees, a much older man than myself—old enough to be my father really, although his position in the bank was no better than mine, but I was favored by the friendship of one of the directors who helped me on."

"This old clerk had a daughter; a girl older than myself, and between us there was a love affair; more on her part really than on mine, but, the first thing I knew, I was entrapped into a sort of engagement."

"From my youth I was rather inclined to be wild. I had a natural genius for playing cards, and, in fact, all games of chance, and was wonderfully successful. Really I could handle cards as well as any gambler that you could pick up in the city."

"I see, it is the old story," said the lawyer, with a shake of the head. "You gambled, lost all your own money and then helped yourself to the bank's funds."

"No, I did nothing of the kind," the Fresh replied. "As I told you, I was a natural-born gambler, and I won money from the gamblers themselves instead of losing, and though I lived a pretty fast life, not particularly dissipated, you know, for my tastes didn't run in that way, but I lived high, dressed well and went in for a good time generally, and that costs money, you know, in New York."

"Indeed it does! I have been there myself!"

the lawyer exclaimed, with a wise shake of the head.

"I got so after awhile that my work in the bank became tiresome to me. I wanted to be my own master—to be free. I felt satisfied that with my skill at cards and billiards I could make a living anywhere, and the stories of the West filled me with a desire to go there.

"Just about this time there was trouble in the bank; there were errors in the books, the cash did not pan out as it ought to have done. The old clerk, with whom I boarded, and I were requested to stay one night, make an examination of the books and see if we couldn't straighten the thing out."

"Yes, yes, I see," observed the lawyer, listening attentively to every word. "Your story is getting deeply interesting."

CHAPTER XVIII.

TOO STRANGE TO BE TRUE.

"We were alone in the bank together, the old clerk and myself," the Fresh continued. "I regarded the matter as a bore. I was getting more and more discontented. There was an easier life for a man of my abilities than to sit on a high stool and pore over a lot of gigantic books. Still, being extremely good at figures, the work didn't bother me as much as the confinement. I wanted to come and go as I liked.

"The examination began; I noticed that my companion seemed ill at ease, and when I asked him if he did not feel well, he replied that his head troubled him, and it was no wonder, for before I had been at the books an hour I discovered that the bank had been robbed of about two thousand dollars, and that my companion was the man who had taken the money."

"Aha! that was quite dramatic!"

"Yes, he saw by my face that I had discovered how he had contrived to cover up his stealings, and he went down on his knees to me and begged me for God's sake not to expose him. He pleaded—not for himself, he said—but for his wife and children—he had quite a family; he brought up the attachment which he knew existed between his eldest girl and myself, cried to me not to publish her to the world as a felon's child.

"I was young then, Mr. Have, and I had a great deal more faith in human nature than I have now, I am sorry to say," the Fresh continued, a hard look upon his handsome face.

"I pitied the man; I knew he had a hard time to get along, for his wife was an extravagant woman, who had no idea of how to live; he had taken the money in small amounts for the actual necessities of life; so he said, and I believed him. But, as I told him, there was no way I could shield him; if I had not made known my discovery, an expert would have been called in and then detection was certain.

"And then he cried out for me to give him a weapon, so he could kill himself and thus save the disgrace of an exposure, and as the man fairly groveled at my feet, a wild idea came into my head. I would save him by taking the blame on my own shoulders. I was young, I wanted to go West, and what did I care if the world thought I was a rascal? When I got away I would take a new name and lead another kind of a life.

"I told him what I would do, and he was fairly beside himself with joy. He called me his preserver, said I had saved both his honor and his life, talked of his children and cried like a child.

"I wrote a letter, addressing it to the president of the bank, confessed my guilt, turned over my bank-book with a credit of some five hundred dollars in it, and then fled that night.

"Whether I was pursued or not I am unable to say. I reckoned that I would be, and so took precautions to cover my trail."

"Hold on, hold on!" exclaimed the lawyer, "your story don't fit in with this case at all. You speak of getting away with two thousand dollars, the sum taken in small amounts, while the bank charges you with having robbed them of eighty thousand dollars' worth of Government bonds!"

"Yes, I know it," responded the Fresh, with a quiet smile.

"Well, how do you explain this matter?"

"That is just exactly what I have been bothering my brains with ever since the charge was sprung upon me. Mind you, I have no actual knowledge of anything being wrong, excepting this stealing I spoke of; but now that it appears that eighty thousand dollars' worth of bonds were taken, I have put on my thinking-cap and have been trying to see how the thing could have been worked."

"And have you figured it out to your satisfaction?" the lawyer asked, regarding the Fresh intently from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"Yes, I think I have. The bank was a heavy dealer in bonds, and at this particular time had over a million dollars' worth on hand.

"I was aware of this fact, for the old clerk and I had charge of the bond department, and on this day, on the night of which I made such a donkey of myself, we had put away the bonds in company, and then the cashier had locked the vault.

"The bonds were tied up in hundred thousand dollar packages.

"On the day after my flight, when I had left behind the letter acknowledging that I had robbed the bank, the devil put it into the head of the old clerk to take eighty thousand dollars out of one of the packages, supplying its place with waste paper.

"Of course the theft was not discovered until this particular package of bonds came to be examined, and then, naturally, it was believed that I had taken them."

"Well, it is possible that the trick might have been worked in that way," the lawyer observed in rather a doubtful way.

"But is there any other reason, but the fact that you and this old clerk alone had access to the bonds, to lead you to suspect he is the man who got away with them?"

"Yes, and that reason seems to me to be an extremely good one. When I fled this clerk was a poor man, deeply in debt and with little prospect of ever being independent, but on my return I find he is a millionaire."

"Hh?" cried the other amazed.

"The man whose crime I took upon my shoulders is Anson Habersham, now president of the Beaver National Bank!"

The lawyer pondered over the matter for a few moments, his brows wrinkled with thought. "It is a pretty tough story," he said at last.

"Too strange to be true, eh?" the Fresh asked with a smile.

"That is the way it would appear, I am afraid, to the world at large."

"I can now understand the man's rise to fortune. With the eighty thousand dollars—the bonds were all coupon ones, unregistered, so that they could be easily disposed of—he speculated; a man with that amount at his back, and knowing the stock market as this man knew it, stands some chance to make money. He succeeded, and now he is in control of the bank and a millionaire."

"It is no use!" the other exclaimed, decidedly. "Your story is nicely put together, but it can't be proven and it would never do to go before a jury with such a yarn. It never would go down in the world!"

"I fancy from your manner that you do not take as much stock in it as you might," the Fresh remarked with a quiet smile.

"No, I don't; I admit it frankly! It may be true, but as I said before, it is a tough yarn."

"It is the only one you will get from me for it is the truth."

"Say, where did you get all this money that they say you are worth—two or three millions?" asked Have, abruptly.

"I am only worth ten or twelve thousand dollars; it is my wife who is worth the millions and those she inherited from her father who was a Texan cattle king."

"You can prove this?"

"Yes."

"Then the eighty thousand dollars didn't give you your start?"

"Not much!"

"Well, now let me see," the lawyer observed, scratching his ear, reflectively. "Let's see what our defense will be."

"The truth will not do, eh?"

"Oh, no, no!" Have cried decidedly. "It is no go; the world will never believe that a man would make such an ass of himself—you will excuse my plain language?"

"Oh, I agree with you. I made the biggest kind of a blunder, and the man for whom I sacrificed myself—who clasped my knees, groveled at my feet—called me his guardian angel—his preserver, and wept tears of joy as he invoked blessings on my head, is now going to do his level best to send me to State Prison, and this is to be my reward. Oh, you are right; I was an ass!"

"Yes, and if your story is true he has determined to close your mouth by locking you up in jail. He says he would be merciful, but the other fellows will not agree to it. That's the old dodge, you know. By the way, is this daughter of his, who swore out the warrant against you, the one you were sweet on in the long ago?"

"Yes, and if I had consented to forsake my wife—get a divorce, so I could marry her, she would not have taken any steps in this matter."

"Ah, I see. Well, does she know anything about this sacrifice on your part?"

"Oh, no; no one but Habersham and I know aught of that. The woman is honest enough in her belief that I took the money."

"You are in for it, I am afraid. Could you raise the eighty thousand?—this talk about interest, you know, is all bosh. The bank can only recover the sum that was taken."

"I guess the wife will see me through if it takes a million!" the Fresh replied, confidently.

"With a million of dollars a man can get a heap of law in New York just about this time," the lawyer observed with a significant wink.

"If your story is the truth, Habersham has made a mistake in driving you to the wall, although it looks as if it was impossible for you to prove anything against him."

"I am satisfied from what Katherine Habersham said to me that he would not have taken

any steps, but she went ahead without his knowledge."

"I see; 'Hell has no fury like a woman scorned!' quoted the lawyer.

"Now, to arrange our plan of battle! As I told you we can make no fight on your story; let that stay in the background at present.

"Our defense will be, mistake about your identity; you are not George Hardy at all, but Jack Escobedo."

"My name in the West was Jackson Blake, Escobedo is my wife's name, and as she was the heiress of the vast Escobedo estate, when we were married I took her name instead of her taking mine."

"Yes, yes, I see; and where in the West did you figure as Jackson Blake?"

"On the Pacific Slope."

"And no doubt you can bring witnesses to prove that you were known as Jackson Blake there."

"A hundred!" the prisoner answered.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PLAN OF BATTLE.

"Aha! now we begin to make some progress!" exclaimed the lawyer, rubbing his fat hands together, gleefully. "We can give them a good fight on this identity question. Did you go directly to San Francisco after leaving New York?"

"Not exactly; I reached there about a month after I left the city. I took the night Express for Canada, so that if I was tracked my followers would be thrown off the scent."

"I see; if you were tracked to Canada they would believe you intended to remain there, being safe from pursuit?"

"Yes, and then by easy stages I made my way to California. I happened to have a hundred odd dollars in my pocket when I started. I had been in a little poker game that afternoon and came directly to the bank with my winnings in my pocket; and on my trip to California I continued to pay my expenses by picking up sharps in the various towns I struck who could not play cards as well as they thought they could."

"Or, rather, they could not play as well as a gentleman about your size."

"Yes."

"In a month then from the time you left New York you were in San Francisco."

"I was."

"And under the name of Jackson Blake you became a sport?"

The lawyer had his memorandum-book and pencil out and was taking notes.

"Yes, I assumed the name immediately after leaving New York, and have been known by it ever since until my marriage with Miss Escobedo in Texas when I had it legally changed to Jack Escobedo."

"Yes, yes. Now the important point—is there any doubt about your being able to get witnesses from San Francisco who will be able to testify that you were known as Jackson Blake there some fifteen years ago?"

"Not the slightest!" The Fresh answered, promptly. "There are three men in New York today who can testify to that—three Californians who are on here for an Eastern trip. One of them is an old Englishman who kept a small hotel where I stopped; the other two are prominent business men who were fond of a little card-playing when the day's work was done. In California card-playing is not looked upon in the same light in which it is regarded in the East; even a professional gambler, who makes a living by card-playing, if he is known to be a square man, is not so utterly shut out from all decent society as he is here in the East."

"Yes, I am aware of that fact, and yet when we come to go into your California life we must remember that the prejudice *does* exist in the East and we must touch it lightly. You were a speculator, or a broker—dealt in mining-shares, or something of that sort."

"That is true enough," the Fresh observed. "I did buy and sell mining-shares, and, for that matter, there were mighty few men in San Francisco at the time, who had any money, who did not."

"A broker! that will do admirably. You will observe, my dear sir, there is a vast difference between the man who bets a hundred dollars that he has better cards in his hand than his opponent, and the gentleman who puts up the same amount of money that Erie stock will not be worth as much thirty days hence as it is now," the lawyer remarked with a sarcastic smile.

"Yes, I am aware that the world so regards it, but, in either case, it is nothing but gambling, pure and simple."

"Oh, no; one is gambling and the other is business. But to our mutton: These three you speak of are highly respectable gentlemen—no discount about them at all!"

"Not a bit; they are all wealthy men, and the Englishman runs one of the biggest hotels now in Frisco."

"The three happened to be at the Sheepshead Bay track the day I rode the match race; they recognized me as an old-time friend, and hunted me up."

"Let me see; only a month between your departure from New York and your arrival in Frisco, and you went to the Englishman's house immediately?"

"Yes."

"Fifteen years ago! Humph! Men's recollections are a little vague when it goes back as far as that," the lawyer remarked, thoughtfully. "Now, as a rule, I don't believe in sharp practice, but once in a while I think a man is justified in trying it on. Now, in this case of yours, if your story is the truth—and the more I reflect upon it, the more I see that it is not so improbable as it appears at the first glance—if ever a man was justified in using any and all means to beat his game, you are that man."

"Yes, it is rather rough on a fellow after he has sacrificed himself to get a man out of a hole, to have the party turn around and do his best to send him to the State Prison," the Fresh observed.

"I had more faith in human nature than to believe that Anson Habersham would turn against me. That is the reason I sent you to him. I did not want to betray him—even to a lawyer who holds such confidences sacred. I expected he would say to you: 'I think there is some mistake about this matter. I do not believe this man is George Hardy, for I have seen and did not recognize him. But even if he is the man, I do not want to prosecute him, and will do all in my power to prevent the matter from being pushed.'"

"Yes, I see; that is exactly what he ought to have said under the circumstances."

"Then I would have kept silent and trusted to luck to get out of the scrape."

"Certainly; but as it is you must fight to the last gasp!"

"I shall; and if my wife sticks to me, as I feel sure she will, I will spend a million dollars to beat this scoundrel, who has not even the dog's sentiment of gratitude."

"Under the circumstances you are justified in seizing upon every chance to improve your position; and therefore I am about to suggest a little bit of off-color business," the lawyer remarked, slowly.

"I will use any means, no matter whether off-color or not!" the Fresh exclaimed, firmly.

"Suppose you send for your Californian hotel friend. By this time he, of course, knows all the particulars of your arrest. You say to him: 'It is ridiculous this charge; I was in California at the time when this crime was committed; why, I stopped with you, didn't I, sixteen years ago?'"

"I see the game! The chances are a thousand to one that he will reply, 'yes, I remember it distinctly!'"

"Exactly, and will go on the witness stand and swear to it like a hero, and he will firmly believe it is the truth, too! A good lawyer never puts a witness on the stand when he knows that the man is going to swear to a lie—is aware of the fact, and deliberately perjures himself. The man who does that is no lawyer, and ought to be thrown over the bars as soon as possible; but I hold that an advocate is justified in using a witness, if the party honestly believes he is telling the truth, even if the lawyer feels certain that he is mistaken."

"You will observe, we quibble with our consciences and split hairs in such matters."

"In this particular case I am sure that I shall not sit in judgment on you," Escobedo replied.

"We will have the hotel-keeper on the stand first, and when the other two hear his evidence it is more than probable that their memories will be refreshed by his testimony, and they too will be quite willing to make oath that they knew and associated with you in San Francisco sixteen years ago."

"It is pretty hard, you know, for a man to go back fifteen or sixteen years and recall the exact time he met a certain party, unless there was some noteworthy event connected with the meeting to fix it in his mind."

"I doubt if there was in this case," the Fresh observed, reflectively. "As far as I can remember there wasn't."

"We will make a strong try for an alibi, but the judge will undoubtedly see probable cause to hold you; then comes the question of bail. Under the circumstances, the prosecution will probably call for a hundred thousand at least; they can hardly have the face to demand more."

"My wife will deposit bonds to that amount."

"It must be done through a party owning real estate in New York county to double the amount," the lawyer explained. "But if your wife puts up the bonds, I can easily find the bondsmen."

"Now, then, we have prepared for the defensive campaign, and as I think we are in good condition, we must see where we can attack the enemy."

"Escobedo! you are not playing any roots on me! You have told me the truth about Habersham!" the lawyer exclaimed, abruptly, and he fixed his penetrating eyes on the Fresh's face.

"As I am a living man I swear to you that it is the truth!" Escobedo declared.

"All right! I will go it, then! I will put de-

tectives on Habersham's record, and have them do their work in such a way that he will soon see that the blood-hounds are on his track."

"I will find out how he made his money, and though he may have covered up his tracks so cleverly that nothing tangible can be discovered, yet, undoubtedly, it will worry the man when he finds the detectives are after him."

"Then I will put some mysterious advertisements in the personal columns of the newspapers which will imply that the brokers who handled a certain party's orders during the past fifteen years are sought for."

"All this, you know, will alarm him, and by thus carrying the war into Africa we will keep him so busy looking out for himself that he will have no time for offensive operations."

"The scheme is a good one, and if your detectives are keen fellows they will discover that Anson Habersham's rise from poverty to affluence was an extremely rapid one."

"If we could only find the party through whom he disposed of the bonds! but such luck as that can hardly be hoped for. I will stick some personals in though hinting at the bond business, all the same."

"Well, I must be off," and the lawyer rose.

"I am going down-town now to look over a newspaper file so as to get the particulars of the robbery as reported at the time. I shall be loaded for them and if I don't make it particular hot for our Beaver National Bank man, then I miss my guess!" And with this assurance the ponderous lawyer withdrew.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PACIFIC-SLOPERS TO THE RESCUE.

CAREFUL and conscientious observers have rendered their opinion that there is something in the climate of the West, particularly of the Pacific Slope, which gives to the inhabitants of that region a free and open-hearted nature which is denied to the resident of the "effete East," and this effect of the climate is so marvelous that even men raised in the cold and spirit-repressing clime of the Atlantic Coast lose their reserve, their selfishness, and become noble-hearted fellows after a few years' sojourn amid the wild lands of the far West.

It would seem as if there was some truth in this assertion, for the three Californians of whom the Fresh spoke were prompt to call upon him.

The sagacious Mr. Have was hardly clear of the prison walls when the Californians made their appearance at the wicket and asked to have speech with Mr. Jack Escobedo.

They were admitted, for under certain rules even the condemned murderers awaiting sentence in the Tombs are allowed to receive visitors, and in the case of a distinguished prisoner like the Fresh the officials were disposed to do all in their power to accommodate him.

It was not often that they had the opportunity to turn the key upon a prisoner who was reputed to be worth three millions of "ducats," and had got into trouble by helping himself to a trifle like eighty thousand dollars.

In the abstract, prison officials are supposed to treat all men alike; in reality they do not do anything of the kind, and money exerts as powerful an influence within prison walls as without.

It stands to reason that if one of the money kings of the world, like Gould or the Vanderbilts, got into a scrape and was placed in confinement he would receive very different treatment from Dick Jones, the shoemaker, or Tom Casey the hod-carrier.

It ought not to be so, of course, but it is and always will be, for the "mighty dollar" possesses wonderful power.

"Money makes the man, and the want of it the fellow."

The Fresh was surprised by the appearance of the Californians, for, though knowing the peculiar warm-heartedness of the Pacific-Slopers, yet he had not expected them so soon, although he believed they would come to his assistance the moment they heard he was in trouble.

Three jolly fellows were the representatives from the West.

Benjamin Howitt, the hotel-keeper, was a stout, broad-shouldered giant of a man, while his companions, Loyal Adams, the head of one of the largest hardware firms on the Pacific Coast, and Joseph Grimshaw, the banker of San Francisco, the managing man of as big a house as there was in the State, were portly, well-bred gentlemen, whose faces would be their passport to good society anywhere.

"Gentlemen, take a seat on the sofa," said Escobedo, waving his hands to the bed, after warm salutations were exchanged. "My apartment in this hotel is not quite so well furnished as my quarters at the Fifth Avenue where I entertained you, but you are heartily welcome all the same."

"Don't say a word!" exclaimed the Englishman, as he deposited himself on the bed, "the surroundings are nothing and the man is everything."

"My sentiments exactly!" Adams remarked, as he took a seat by the hotel-keeper's side.

"And mine to a hair!" chimed in the banker, also seating himself.

The Fresh sat down upon the stool.

"Well, gentlemen, you find me in durance vile, as the poet remarks."

"Oh, but what beastly rot it is, the charge against you!" the Englishman cried.

"It is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of in my life!" Adams exclaimed.

"It is perfectly absurd!" Grimshaw declared.

"Well, I think myself it is a little far-fetched," the Fresh remarked.

"We would have been down to see you last night, just as soon as we read of your arrest in the evening newspaper, but we consulted the hotel detective about the matter, knowing that he would be posted in regard to the rules and regulations, and could tell us how to get at you, and he advised us to wait until morning, as he said visitors were not welcome after dark," the Englishman explained.

"Oh, you can bet we were coming post-haste!" Loyal Adams exclaimed. "We Californians are not backward in coming forward when a friend is in difficulties."

"Particularly when we see that there is a disposition to jump on him with both feet in a strange land!" the banker added.

"Well, gentlemen, I assure you I appreciate your kindness!" the Fresh declared.

"As I said before, this charge is so utterly ridiculous to us who know better!" the Englishman declared.

"We talked the matter over last night," the hardware man explained.

"It is absurd, the idea of charging you with being this George Hardy, who got away with eighty thousand dollars fifteen years ago!" Grimshaw declared. "We just put our heads together and talked this matter over. Fifteen years ago you were in California with us, and I know, deuced well, you didn't have any eighty thousand dollars in those days, for many a time when we sat around a little table enjoying ourselves, you have demanded a 'sight' for your money, and a few hundred dollars was all you could put up."

"Gentlemen, I have got it down fine," the Englishman exclaimed. "It is just about sixteen years ago this month when Jackson here took a room with me. I am positive about the date, for it was just after I opened my place on Bush street—a few doors from the theater, you remember, gentlemen, and Blake was one of the first men who took a room in the house, and he stayed with me there for nearly three years, right along."

"Of course I remember it," Adams declared. "I know it was a good sixteen years ago when I met Blake at your house; what fixes the time in my memory is that it was just after I was married, and one afternoon I put a hundred dollars in my pocket, intending to buy the wife a diamond ring the next day. I met Blake for the first time that night. We had a little game, and my better half didn't get any ring; and I remember that I had to skin around pretty lively the next day to raise a hundred to meet an I O U, which I presented our esteemed friend here."

"Yes, I remember the night as well as though it was only yesterday," the Fresh remarked.

"Well, I can't say that there is any particular circumstance to fix the exact year in my memory," Grimshaw remarked, "except that I know I made Mr. Blake's acquaintance at your house, and it was right after you opened the Bush street place. I would have said, though, that it was about seventeen years ago."

"No, sixteen this month," the Englishman declared.

"Well, gentlemen, it is a lucky thing for me that you are here, or else these New Yorkers might have made it warm for me. Your evidence, though, will go far to show that I am not the man they take me to be."

"We will see you through, Blake. You were always a white man, and as square as they make 'em," the landlord declared.

The others echoed the sentiment.

Then the Fresh suggested that they had better call upon his lawyer, as his office was right in the neighborhood, and advise him in regard to the testimony they were prepared to give.

So, after a few more words, they withdrew. Another half-hour and Margaret Escobedo made her appearance, having been summoned by telegraph.

She was pale and anxious.

To his wife Escobedo confessed all, for since his marriage it had been his policy not to have any secrets from Margaret.

"You acted like a hero," Margaret declared, "and if it costs us every dollar that we have, you must not let these wretches triumph over you."

"Very little danger of that," he answered her, and then he explained how his Californian friends were prepared to prove an alibi for him by swearing that he was in San Francisco at the time when the robbery occurred.

"But they are really wrong about the matter!"

"Yes, the lapse of years has confused their memories, but they are fully satisfied that they are swearing to the truth, and as they are all men of standing and position—men who could

not be induced to swear to a falsehood on any account—their evidence will have great weight."

"There is no danger then that you will be found guilty?"

"Well, the chances are great that I will not be, but law is a very uncertain thing, you know."

"Oh, my darling, it would kill me if you were to be taken from me!" Margaret exclaimed as she wound her arms tightly around the man she loved.

The heart of the Fresh gave a great bound; Margaret had been so quiet and cold for the last few months that it seemed as if her love was on the wane, and in the confidence of the moment he said so to her.

"Oh, I have gloomy spells sometimes," she explained. "I do not mean to be cold and distant, but sometimes, the fancy comes to me that there is a curse on this money which so strangely came to me, and that I am not fated to enjoy it long. The wild scenes of the West come back to me and I shudder with fear. If I had not your love to sustain me I think I would go to a convent and become a sister, for there is little in the world that is attractive to me."

The Fresh understood what the trouble was, although neither he nor his wife had ever exchanged words on the subject.

Heaven had denied them a child to bless their love and the woman sorrowed over it.

He spoke words of consolation, and then, when she was cheered up a little, instructed her in regard to depositing bonds with the lawyer in order that bail might be secured.

"Keep up your courage!" she said, "I will get out of this and laugh at my enemies!"

Thus encouraged Margaret departed.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE EXAMINATION.

WHEN the hour fixed for the examination of Jack Escobedo drew near the court-room became crowded to suffocation, and the officers had great difficulty in preserving order; not that the crowd were at all inclined to be disorderly, but all were so anxious to see, and hear, that they got in each others way.

There were a dozen or so of minor cases disposed of in, which few of the auditors present took the slightest interest, and then, George Hardy, alias Jack Escobedo, was called to the bar.

The district attorney was there in person to conduct the case, for the directors of the Beaver National Bank having held a meeting that morning and determined to prosecute the case to the bitterest extremity of the law, a committee was appointed to wait upon the district attorney and advise him of the importance of the case.

They were all men of position, and as they were of the same political party as the official, he promised to do all he could for them.

All three of the lawyers who were the paid counsel of the bank were also present to advise the district attorney and his assistant.

And when Lawyer Have made his appearance, solitary and alone, but marching through the court-room, better dressed than any man in the room, and with an air which seemed to suggest that he owned all New York, his keen eyes caught sight of the array of "talent" clustered by the side of the district attorney.

He came to a dead stop and glanced in astonishment at the group.

"Five lawyers!" he ejaculated, elevating his eyebrows, and for the moment attracting the attention of every eye in the court-room. "Five of them! Egad, they must think their case is a weak one, and expect to win it by force of numbers!" Then he continued his dignified approach.

There was a general "snicker" at this remark, which was distinctly heard by the majority in the room, although the lawyer was apparently conversing with himself when he made the observation.

The case was called, Escobedo was placed in the prisoner's box and the district attorney rose to proceed.

In substance—we'll strip his speech of its legal verbiage—he charged the prisoner at the bar with being George Hardy, who fifteen years before, being then a clerk in the Beaver National Bank, had absconded, taking with him funds of the bank amounting to eighty-one thousand, five hundred dollars.

The moment he had finished, Lawyer Have was on his legs.

"Your Honor, I appear for the prisoner, and I take this opportunity for saying that this change of front on the part of the prosecution is something astounding!" he exclaimed. "Yesterday my client was arrested on a warrant which charged him with having robbed the Beaver National Bank of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and now, all of a sudden, the amount is whittled down to one-half, probably to-morrow, on sober second thoughts the Beaver National Bank will come to the conclusion that they haven't lost anything at all!" and then the counsellor shook his head as though he was woefully annoyed at the contradiction.

"Your Honor," said the district attorney, "my office is not responsible for the issuing of

the warrant upon which the prisoner at the bar was arrested. It was sworn out by a party who recognized the prisoner but was not aware of the exact amount of the loss sustained by the bank."

Lawyer Have was on his feet again in an instant; for so large and portly a man he was wonderfully spry.

"I hate to have to correct the course of my learned brother, but the truth is mighty and must prevail. The warrant was sworn out by a party acting in the interest of the Beaver National Bank, and as the said party is a relative of the president of the bank it is fair to infer that the action was inspired by him. The trouble was that the bank, Shylock-like, wanted blood as well as flesh, interest for fifteen years as well as principal, but to-day, having probably been informed that their demand is a little extravagant, they reduce it."

And then the lawyer sat down and looked around him as much to say that he had scored an important point, and so magnetic was his theatrical way with the crowd that the majority of the people in the place thought that he really had secured an important advantage.

"Your Honor, this point is immaterial I submit," the district attorney remarked, a little impatiently. "We charge the prisoner at the bar with having robbed the bank in which he was a clerk, and we will, by witnesses, prove what sum of money was stolen."

"Certainly it is not material!" Lawyer Have exclaimed, apparently very indignant and sarcastic. "We will have the district attorney arrest a man for bigamy next and then proceed to try him for murder when he gets him at the bar!"

This raised a laugh, whereupon the judge sternly rapped for order.

"I will have the court-room cleared if there is any more disorder!" he threatened.

"It seems to me that the point is not material. The prisoner is charged with stealing and the sum taken can be proved by witnesses."

"I bow to your Honor's decision," the ponderous counselor remarked, with a graceful salute.

The first witness called was the porter of the bank, Patrick O'Dermott, a stout, honest-looking, old Irishman.

After his name, occupation, etc., was given, the district attorney asked:

"You were porter of the Beaver National Bank fifteen years ago?"

"Yis, sur, an' twenty years ago, too."

"Do you know the prisoner at the bar?"

The Irishman took a good, long look at the Fresh, who bore the scrutiny without flinching. "I think I do, sur."

"When and where did you ever see him before?"

"He was a clerk in the Beaver National Bank 'bout fifteen years ago, and he ran away wid der bank's money—"

"Hold on, hold on, don't be too fast!" the lawyer continued. "Confine yourself, please, to answering merely the question which is asked you."

"Yis, sur, I will."

"What name did the prisoner bear when you knew him?"

"George Hardy."

"And he was a clerk in the Beaver National Bank?"

"Yes, sur."

"State when you last saw the prisoner."

"It was, wan night in September, the fourteenth of September. I was tould by the cashier in the afternoon to meet Mr. Hardy and Mr. Habersham at the bank that avenin' at seven o'clock, I ave them in' an' give them the keys."

"And did you do so?"

"Yis, sur, an' when I kem in the morning the dure was locked. I went to Mr. Habersham's house but he wasn't there. Whin I got back to the bank I found Mr. Soaper, the cashier to the fore, an' whin I tould him about the keys he got alarmed, sint me for a locksmith, an' whin he kem he picked the lock an' inside we found Mr. Habersham almost dead; he was all tied up wid a gag in his mouth an'—"

"Your Honor, I object!" cried Have, on his feet immediately. "What has this to do with my client?"

"Shure he was the man that—"

"Do you know that of your own knowledge?" thundered the lawyer, while the district attorney yelled to the witness to be quiet.

The old man was sorely bothered.

"I only wanted to tell the truth," he muttered.

"Unless it can be shown that my client has some connection with this affair, known to this witness, the testimony is not admissible."

"Your objection is sustained," the judge ruled.

The Irishman retired, and the bank president, Anson Habersham, took the stand.

His name, etc., was given, and he clearly identified the prisoner as being the George Hardy who was a fellow clerk with him in the Beaver National Bank fifteen years before.

"State what occurred on the night of September fourteenth."

"On that night, Mr. Hardy and myself were deputed by the president of the bank to examine the books for the purpose of ascertaining who was responsible for some errors which had appeared. Mr. Hardy boarded with me but did not accompany me home to supper as usual; he said he had an engagement down-town and that he would meet me at the bank at seven o'clock, and he did."

"We entered the bank and began our work. I noticed that he seemed to be strangely uneasy, and although I supposed him to be a young man of very correct habits the thought came to me that he had been drinking."

"In the course of a couple of hours I made a discovery that the bank had been robbed of about two thousand dollars, and from the way the stealing had been done the conviction was forced upon me that Mr. Hardy was the man who had taken the money."

"He had been watching me intently and saw from my face that I knew he was the guilty man."

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked. "I shall have to report it of course," I replied, sadly, for I felt sorry for him.

"You will ruin my life and I shall be sent to jail!" he exclaimed. "I cannot help it," I replied. "I would screen you if I could, but it is impossible."

"Then he suddenly sprang upon me and with a powerful blow knocked me insensible."

"When I recovered, I found that he had bound me tightly and was standing over me with a gag all ready to put into my mouth."

"I had to do it!" he cried, "for I will not go to jail! I have written a letter to the bank confessing my guilt and here is my bank-book. I give up all I have and will try to lead an honest life in the future."

"Then, before I could expostulate he forced the gag in my mouth and departed, leaving me bound and helpless, and thus I was found in the morning, more dead than alive."

This concluded the bank president's testimony and when he left the stand the audience drew a long breath.

This was as good as a play.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WITNESSES SQUIRM.

THE next witness was the cashier of the bank—that is the cashier at the time of the robbery, Mr. Soaper.

He fully identified the prisoner as being the George Hardy who had been a clerk in the bank at the time when he was cashier. Told how in company with the porter he had entered the building after the locksmith had picked the lock on the morning of September fifteenth and found Mr. Habersham lying almost dead upon the floor; then stated how he had found a letter from Hardy, together with his bank-book, containing a credit of five hundred dollars upon one of the desks. The letter was a confession that he had robbed the bank and was about to seek safety in flight.

Mr. Soaper's manner of giving his testimony was entirely different from Habersham's.

The bank president was quiet and cool, and spoke with a subdued and regretful air, as though the position was not a pleasant one, and that he regretted being obliged to testify.

Soaper, on the contrary, was eager and anxious, and from the glances that he cast at the prisoner it was plain that he bore him no good will.

Mr. Soaper wound up by telling how a few days after the flight of Hardy he had occasion to examine the Government bonds, in which the bank dealt largely, and was amazed to discover that eighty thousand dollars' worth had been abstracted from a package, and as the missing clerk had access to the bonds it was plain that he had robbed the bank of a much larger sum than was at first supposed.

The last witness was Katherine Habersham, and she was merely used to identify the prisoner.

Now then it was Lawyer Have's innings, and right good work he did too.

The old Irishman was summoned first, and the honest old man admitted that the prisoner had changed so much he would not have recognized him if he had met him on the street and been ignorant as to who he was.

"But you had a talk with some one who refreshed your memory!" the lawyer suggested, in his smoothest way.

"Yis, sir, Mister Soaper was after tellin' me that Mister Hardy was caught an' that I would have to come down to the court and swear to him," the old man answered, honestly.

"A wink is as good as a nod to a blind horse," the counselor observed, as the Irishman descended from the stand.

Mr. Soaper he called for next.

"You spoke of a letter written by the prisoner confessing his guilt," the lawyer began abruptly. "Have you that letter?"

"Yes, sir."

Soaper produced it, and the lawyer read it aloud.

It was written on a scrap of paper, about half a page of note-size, and ran as follows:

"I have yielded to temptation and am going to get out. I leave my bank-book to make up a little of the shortage." (Signed) GEORGE HARDY.

"A little of the shortage! five hundred dollars to make up eighty odd thousand!" the lawyer remarked, elevating his eyebrows.

"And this is in the handwriting of George Hardy."

"Oh, no, that is a copy," Soaper replied.

"Ah! and the original?"

"It has been lost; it was on a scrap of paper just like that," Soaper explained.

"The disappearance of the original letter is remarkable, the production of this copy is still more remarkable. I submit, your Honor, that this paper cannot be received with the credit due to an original letter."

"We will prove by ample evidence that it is an exact copy of the original!" the district attorney declared.

"Let it be marked," and the lawyer sent the note to the judge.

"Now, then, Mr. Soaper, you say you discovered that, shortly after the time of the disappearance of this clerk, George Hardy, that the bank had been robbed of eighty thousand dollars' worth of Government bonds?"

"Yes, by this George Hardy."

"Stop a bit—don't be so fast," Lawyer Have counseled, waving his fat fore-finger at the witness. "Why do you think George Hardy took the bonds?"

"Because he was in the bond department, and so had an opportunity to steal them."

"Was he the only man who had access to the bonds? Remember, you are under oath, Mr. Soaper!" the counselor warned as he noticed that the witness hesitated.

"No, Mr. Habersham and myself also had access to the bonds."

"But, as Mr. Hardy had fled, you jumped to the conclusion that he had taken them."

"Yes."

"But either you or Mr. Habersham had an opportunity to steal the bonds if you had been so disposed?"

"Yes," responded the witness, very slowly and reluctantly.

"That is all, thank you."

The witness turned to go.

"Wait a bit!" exclaimed the lawyer, as if a sudden thought had just occurred to him.

This, by the way, was an old trick of the counselor, and sometimes produced important results.

A witness, after bracing himself to stand the cross-examination, was told that was all, and prepared to depart, happy at having got off so well, then, being recalled, thrown off his guard, an apparently careless question would bring from him an answer which would upset the whole of the evidence which he had been so careful about giving.

Soaper turned again.

"You were a particular friend of this clerk, George Hardy, I believe, in the long ago?" the lawyer asked.

"Well, no, I was acquainted with him, of course, being in the same bank, but I cannot say there was any particular friendship between us," the witness replied, evidently annoyed by the question and plainly betraying it.

"You were not the young man's enemy?" and the lawyer put the question with an air which seemed to say that suggestion had just occurred to him, and that it was altogether too monstrous for him to entertain.

"No, I— That is to say, I knew very little about Mr. Hardy; we did not associate together at all," Soaper answered, evidently ill at ease.

"When you discovered that this eighty thousand dollars' worth of bonds had disappeared, did you employ detectives?"

"Yes, sir, and they tracked Mr. Hardy to Canada, but were unable to discover any trace of him there."

"Oh, then it was assumed that Hardy had taken the bonds?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the detectives or the bank officers made no efforts to discover whether it was not possible that he was not the guilty party, but that some one else had taken the bonds?"

"No, sir, not that I am aware of."

"You would have known it if it had been done?"

"Yes, sir, I presume I should."

"Presume, sir!" thundered the lawyer.

"Witness, you are under oath! Do you not know that you would have known of it if any such effort had been made?"

"Yes, sir, I would," Soaper replied, getting very red in the face, for the idea that he, a man worth his million, should have to submit to this treatment was extremely disgusting.

"No, then, is it not a fact that instead of being a mere business acquaintance of this George Hardy, as you have said, you were his mortal enemy, and that you openly threatened if he did not cease his attentions to a certain lady, whom you desired to woo, that you would drive him from the bank and ruin him?"

This was like the explosion of a bombshell. The witness turned all sorts of colors and fidgeted in his chair.

A black scowl of anger came over Anson

Habersham's face, and Katherine flushed scarlet from her neck to the roots of her hair.

This was so entirely unexpected that it took them all by surprise.

Every neck in the court-room was craned forward, the owners anxious not to lose a word of the dialogue.

The district attorney thought it necessary to come to the relief of the witness.

"Your Honor, I protest against this attempt to brow-beat and bulldoze the witness!" he exclaimed.

"Bulldoze! great heavens! it is plain that you have never been introduced to me, or you would never mistake my gentle endeavors to get at the truth for bulldozing!" the lawyer exclaimed. "If I should open my batteries on the witness once, in downright earnest, you would soon see the difference. But I respectfully submit, your Honor," he continued, turning to the judge, "that I am proceeding in order. Can I not show that the witness bears such a mortal hatred to the prisoner that he naturally would be biased against him?"

"I think, Mr. District Attorney, that there is nothing out of the way in the examination so far," the judge remarked.

Lawyer Have turned to the witness again, shook his fat fore-finger warningly at him and said:

"Now, is it not a fact that only a day or two before this George Hardy quitted the bank, you had an altercation with him, during which you threatened to accomplish his ruin, and he, in anger, took you by the nose and pulled it until you roared for mercy?"

Soaper became almost purple in the face.

"I—I did have some trouble with him, but that would not influence my actions at all!" he declared.

"Oh, of course not; men usually like to have their noses pulled in presence of half-a-dozen witnesses of course," the lawyer remarked, sarcastically.

"That is all, thank you."

Soaper withdrew from the stand, his fat face shining with perspiration.

Never before in all his life had he been put through such an ordeal.

"Mr. Habersham to the stand, please," said the lawyer.

The bank president advanced; he knew now what he might expect and nerved himself to meet it, while as for Katherine she wished she was safe at home, for she feared her trial would be worse than the others.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DECISION.

COUNSELOR HAVE began as mildly with Mr. Habersham as though he was the dearest friend he had in the world.

"You are now president of the Beaver National Bank, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fifteen years ago, at the time of this robbery, you were a clerk in that institution?"

"Yes, sir."

"And your wife took boarders to help you along?"

"Yes, sir," responded Habersham, getting a little red in the face.

"Your Honor, I protest against this line of examination—what has it to do with the case?" cried the district attorney.

"So much, sir, that you dare not let me go into it!" yelled Have, excitedly.

"It is a sheer waste of time!"

"I am a better judge of that than you!"

"Gently, gently, gentlemen!" cried the Judge. "Mr. Have, it seems to me that these questions are not to the point; may I ask your object?"

"Yes, sir!" exclaimed the counselor now full of excitement. He had attained the point for which he had been working.

"I wish to bring out the truth in regard to the stealing of these bonds!" he cried with the utmost rapidity—his object being to get out what he wished to say before he could be interrupted. "Three men had access to them—one is charged with taking them, but I want to show that in the short space of fifteen years, another of the three rose from abject poverty to be a millionaire, and no one knows how he made his money."

"I object, I object!" yelled the district attorney, jumping up. "This attack upon the witness is outrageous and is worthy only of a practitioner in the lowest police court!"

"I repel the insult with contempt!" howled Lawyer Have. "And as a lawyer I am ready to put my reputation against that of the district attorney's any time!"

This was a home thrust, for the official was a much better politician than lawyer.

"The little judge's gavel came down sharply. 'Gentlemen, gentlemen, this unseemly contention must cease!' he exclaimed.

"Officers, keep order in the court and put out the first man who makes a disturbance."

The altercation had excited the spectators and made considerable confusion.

"I submit, your Honor, that the witness is not on trial, and this accusation that the lawyer for the defense has made against him is monstrous!" cried the district attorney.

"I have made no accusation!" yelled the counselor. "If the facts accuse the man, so much the worse for the man!"

"It is outrageous!" cried the district attorney.

"Order, order, gentlemen! You must proceed in order!" the judge declared.

"I think, Mr. Have, you are allowing yourself too much latitude. The witness is not on trial. If your questions are intended to bring out answers which will impeach his testimony, you can go on, but not otherwise."

"Not on trial now, your Honor, I am aware, but, as Shakespeare says, 'we know what we are, but we know not what we may be!' I am through with the witness," and then he sat down.

Habersham's face was as pale as death as he descended from the stand; the trial had been a severe one.

There was hardly a person in the court-room who was not filled with wonder, for the lawyer had intimated, in the broadest possible manner, that it was the president of the Beaver National Bank who had stolen the bonds.

Katherine Habersham was the next witness summoned, and her face was like marble as she kissed the Bible and then sat down.

The lawyer's face was as stern as that of an accusing judge when he faced the witness.

"Your name is Katherine Habersham?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were acquainted with one George Hardy, some fifteen years ago?"

"Yes, the prisoner."

"Never mind the prisoner! we will come to him in time," responded the lawyer, frowning.

"This George Hardy boarded at your father's house fifteen years ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was there a marriage engagement between you and this George Hardy?"

"I object, your Honor!" cried the district attorney; "what has this to do with the case? Why will my learned brother persist in going on these fishing excursions?"

"After fish!" exclaimed Have, under his breath.

This caused a laugh, and even the little judge smiled; he brought his gavel down sharply all the same though.

"Your Honor, is it not proper to show the relations which have existed between the witness and the man against whom she has testified?"

"I think it is, but pray keep within bounds."

"Not by a hair's breadth will I overstep them!" cried the lawyer, theatrically.

"Answer, please."

"No, sir, there was not."

"But you and he were lovers?" pursued the counselor, remorselessly, notwithstanding that Katherine's face was scarlet.

"Yes, sir," she replied, in an almost inaudible tone.

"Did you know he was going away when he left New York?"

"No, sir."

"Then he really deserted you?"

"I—yes, he went away."

"Did you ever get word from him?"

"No, sir."

"You swore out this warrant for his arrest?"

"Yes, sir."

"At whose instigation?"

"No one."

"You acted for yourself?"

"Yes, sir."

"I submit, your Honor, that we are wasting time!" cried the district attorney, impatiently.

"It is the duty of every good citizen to bring to justice a fugitive who had fled to escape the law he has outraged."

"Gently! gently! Don't tell me how I shall conduct my case," Have retorted.

"Did you have an interview with the prisoner before you caused his arrest?"

"Yes, sir," and the woman's face became pale and like marble again, as she nerved herself to meet the ordeal.

"Would you have any objection to relate what passed between you during that interview?"

"No, sir; I told him he was discovered, and I was going to have him arrested unless he paid back the money, with interest, which he had taken."

"Oh, you offered to compromise the matter?"

"Yes."

"And he refused?"

"He did."

"No doubt; he was not going to pay for another man's stealings. Then you caused his arrest?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who instructed you to try to compromise this matter?"

"No one; it was my own idea."

"You were not angry with him because he had left you and married another woman?"

Again Katherine's face flushed scarlet.

"No, sir!" she exclaimed, nerving herself to put a bold face on the matter.

"You did not offer to hold back the warrant if he would get a divorce from his wife and marry you?"

"Your Honor, I really must protest against such questions as these," the district attorney cried.

"I think, Mr. Have, it would be better for you to get at the subject in another way," the judge suggested.

"It is really a matter of indifference to me, anyway, your Honor," replied the lawyer, with a sudden change of front which astonished everybody. "That is all," he said to the witness. Katherine left the stand, glad to escape.

"Your Honor, I think I have amply shown by these very witnesses whom the prosecution have brought forward to convict George Hardy, that the said George Hardy had no more to do with stealing the eighty thousand dollars' worth of bonds than I had. It is the old story of give a dog a bad name and then hang him. But, although I have gone into this affair to get at the truth, it is really a matter of perfect indifference to my client whether George Hardy took the money or not, for he is not George Hardy, which I will now proceed to prove by witnesses whose testimony cannot be impeached in any way."

This announcement took everybody by surprise, for the lawyer had made such a stout fight in regard to the evidence that no one supposed he had that excellent defense, an *alibi*, to offer.

The Californians were placed upon the stand and they gave their testimony with an air which impressed almost everybody in the room with the idea that they were telling the truth.

The bank party were astonished; they were fully satisfied that they had not made any mistake and this testimony completely upset them.

The district attorney, nettled at the trick which had been played upon him, put the Pacific-Slopers through a vigorous cross-examination, but they, being all experienced men of the world, stood the ordeal unflinchingly, and from their bearing it was plainly to be seen that they only wanted to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth.

Judge Duffy was puzzled.

Here were two sets of witnesses, each equally credible, yet swearing directly contrary.

The Californians were old friends of the accused, but they were not men to lie even for an old friend.

On the side of the other witnesses, there was a deal of realism that was evident, still, if the prisoner was not George Hardy, there was no reason why they should desire to harm him.

"I'll hold him for trial and let a jury decide," was the decision to which he came.

"Bail will be taken of course," Have observed.

"Yes, but we want a sum big enough to hold the prisoner!" the district attorney declared, annoyed at his discomfiture.

"You can have a million of dollars!" Have cried, grandiloquently.

"A hundred thousand will be ample," Judge Duffy decided.

And so the case was settled.

The lawyer had his bondsmen all ready, and within an hour the business was settled and Jack Escobedo went forth into the sunlight, a free man again.

The wonderful luck of the Fresh had not deserted him even in the "effete East."

CHAPTER XXIV.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

A COUPLE of weeks passed away, and during that time the great case of Jack Escobedo was the general topic of conversation in New York, but it must be a great sensation indeed which will interest the people of the great metropolis for more than a week or ten days at a stretch, for something new is coming up all the time to claim attention, and now the talk was dying out.

The shades of night were beginning to fall upon the city; Anson Habersham had just reached his home.

He looked worried and annoyed; Katherine perceiving the cloud upon his brow hastened to ask the reason.

"Mr. Soaper and myself have just come from a visit to the district attorney," he replied.

"Ah, in reference to Hardy's case?" she exclaimed, full of interest at once.

"Yes."

"And when will it come up?"

"Never, I think."

"Never!"

"That is the present outlook," the father replied, gloomily.

"But I do not understand!"

"The district attorney does not believe that there is any use of going to trial with the evidence that we now have. He declares it is useless to hope to get a verdict from any jury upon such proof."

"I do not see how that can be."

"My dear child, I am afraid you do not want to see," the bank president retorted.

"We got altogether the worst of that examination, even before the *alibi* trick was sprung upon us. If we could prove conclusively to the satisfaction of a jury that this Jack Escobedo, or Jackson Blake, as it seems he was called in California, is George Hardy we could not hope to commit him as the case now stands."

"What a shame!" the daughter declared, anger shining in her dark eyes.

"Yes, I am sorry we took any steps in the matter. If you remember, I told you at Sheep-head Bay, when you recognized the man, that it would be as well not to bother with him."

"Father, I was hungry for revenge!" Katherine cried. "The man deserted me, scorned my love and I was determined to crush him!"

"You proceeded heedlessly and without counting the cost as is usually the fashion of your sex!" he declared.

"You should have waited and advised with me about the matter; then we might have concocted a snare so strong that it would hold the bird once he was caught in it; as it is, he has broken through without any trouble, and I fear we will never be able to trap him again."

"Why, father, I did not think there was any doubt that he would be convicted if he was denounced," Katherine remarked.

"That is because you are very little better informed than the rest of your sex in regard to the law. You should have calculated that fifteen years have elapsed, and years destroy proof. Even Hardy's letter acknowledging his crime, has disappeared, and though Soaper and myself can swear to the exact contents, yet that is not like the letter itself. And that infernal lawyer weakened all our testimony by showing that we had reason to be angry with the man."

"And what a disgraceful accusation that was which he made against you, father!" the woman exclaimed. "He as good as said that you took the bonds, and that was how you got your start in life."

"Yes, I know it!" the bank president replied, his face dark with anger. "And now the scoundrel has put detectives on my track."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, indeed it is, and they are trying to rake up my old business transactions, going back twelve or fifteen years."

"The infamous wretch!"

"It is extremely annoying, but the fellow will not be able to harm me with all his spies," the father remarked, grimly.

"Of course not! The thought is ridiculous! and the man must have very little judgment to do such a thing."

"Oh, the lawyer is smart enough—he is a shrewd fellow; and a match for about a dozen of the district attorney's stamp. It is George Hardy who has put this idea into his head; he has probably told the lawyer that I had a share in the plunder, but contrived the robbery in so cunning a manner that all the blame would fall upon him."

"It would be only natural for him to wish to be revenged after the way we attacked him."

"Such reports do a man in my position no good, for I have plenty of enemies who are only too glad to affect to believe them."

"But you can easily show how you made your money!" Katherine exclaimed. "Your brokers will be able to tell in regard to your transactions, if you wish them to do so."

"No, they cannot; that is, not the brokers who did my business ten or fifteen years back, for the firm went to smash long ago; both the partners are dead and their books destroyed. And that is a snag that these detectives will run up against when they try to pry into my past transactions," the banker continued with an air of satisfaction. "So I have one consolation; if I cannot prove that I made my money honestly my enemies will not be able to prove that I made it in any other way."

"Then for the present we are powerless to harm this man," Katherine remarked, her brow gloomy with thought.

"Yes, we must wait for another turn of fortune's wheel. As the matter stands at present he has got decidedly the best of the fight. He is free under bail, and unless some new evidence is discovered the district attorney will not be apt to bring the case to trial. He told me, frankly, that he cannot afford to go into a fight with the chances all against him. Some of the newspapers, who are opposed to him politically, have attacked him in the bitterest manner on account of the way he runs his office; he has been unlucky in losing cases lately and these journals claim that it is because he is not fit for the position he holds, and he is not willing to give his enemies another chance at him by undertaking to prosecute a case which he feels is hopeless."

"Oh! is it not miserable that this man should be able to baffle us in such a manner?" the woman cried in an outburst of passion.

"Yes, and it was a great error on our part to commence the attack, although I must admit that it seemed as if there would be no difficulty in convicting the fellow."

"It was that miserable lawyer!" Katherine declared. "We should have had him on our side."

"Yes, he is an able man and managed the case in an exceedingly skillful way," the father replied. "And now some of our directors are inclined to be ugly. They think that if this Escobedo is really George Hardy, and is worth the two or three millions of dollars—of which there seems to be no doubt—if we had gone to him quietly and said, 'we know you, you helped yourself to our money fifteen years ago, now that you are rich what do you propose to do

about it?' he, rather than had an exposure, would have compromised the matter with us."

"Ah, but I tried him, father!" Katherine exclaimed. "I had an interview with him before I called upon the directors, but he would not admit that he was George Hardy at all, and when I threatened to denounce him he defied me."

"Yes, but you wanted him to renew the old love affair with you, you wanted him to give up his wife—through whom he gets his money, I understand—and take you. You did not make a business proposition to him but a sentimental one. The lawyer was on the right track, was he not, when he questioned you in regard to the matter on your cross-examination?"

A burning blush swept over the pale face of the woman, and the long lashes descended over the dark, passionate eyes.

"Yes, it is the truth," she answered, slowly.

"Oh, father, I cannot explain to you how strong is the love I bore this man! All these years I have waited patiently for his return, for I have never doubted that he would return some day and claim me. And now that he has come back, to find that he belongs to another woman drives me near to madness. I would do and dare all to gain him! And my nature is such that if I cannot have his love then I will give him cause to curse the hour when he preferred another love to mine."

"This action on your part has enraged Mr. Soaper frightfully," Habersham remarked. "I tried to persuade him that it was not possible you had done anything of the kind—that it was only a wily trick of the lawyer to weaken your evidence, but he would not credit it. He is frightfully jealous and now is very much enraged at you, for he considers you have made a fool of him."

"Poor, foolish, old man!" Katherine exclaimed in a tone of contemptuous pity. "He certainly has been the most constant of lovers. For over sixteen years now he has been devoted in his attentions."

"Yes, and to my thinking you have acted very foolishly in not having married him long ago," the father observed. "He is a very wealthy man, and if you were his wife there would be few things in the world that you could not enjoy."

"Happiness would be one of the few things I fear," the woman remarked with a faint shiver.

"I am under a great many obligations to Soaper and I am very sorry that this affair happened," the banker remarked in a grave tone. "I don't want him to fall out with me. He and I are mixed up in some business matters, and I depend upon his money to carry the enterprises to a successful termination."

"Oh, don't worry about that, father. I can easily twist the old man around my fingers. If I am only pleasant and gracious with him he becomes as wax in my hand!" the daughter exclaimed.

"Well, I hope you will exert your influence as soon as you can, for most decidedly I can not afford to break with Soaper now."

"I will have him at my feet to-morrow!" she declared with the arrogance of a true coquette.

"Take care that you are not overrating your power," the father continued.

"Oh, have no fear on that score!"

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a servant, who brought a message that a lady desired to speak with Miss Habersham.

CHAPTER XXV.

A STRANGE PROPOSAL.

"Who is it?"

"I don't know, miss."

"Didn't she give her name?"

"No, miss, I asked her, but she said she was a stranger to you and that you wouldn't know her."

"What is she like—some begging impostor, or somebody with something to sell?"

"No, miss, I think not; she is beautifully dressed, wears splendid diamonds, miss, and came in her carriage, I think; leastways there's a private coupe, with a coachman in livery, drawn up in front of the door."

"I will go and see what she wants," Katherine remarked, her curiosity roused by the description.

In the entry she found the lady, seated in a chair, which the servant had placed for her.

As the man had said she was indeed elegantly dressed and bore that unmistakable air which only birth and education gives.

She rose as Miss Habersham approached; she was tall, above the medium height, and magnificently formed; a decided brunette with brilliant black eyes, yet her hair was a light, golden brown; her face was a striking one; it would not be called beautiful, for it was too masculine, and the upper lip was shaded by a light mustache, not an uncommon thing with ladies of Gallic descent.

"Miss Habersham?" asked the stranger as Katherine approached.

"Yes," Katherine responded, returning the lady's salute.

She saw at a glance that the servant was

right in his judgment—this was no common woman.

"I am going to ask you to grant me the favor of a private interview," the stranger said. "I am aware it is rather an odd request, coming as it does from a person whom you never saw before, but I have an important business matter to discuss with you, and I feel sure you will not regret it if you yield to my request. Here is my card."

Katherine took the pasteboard, and read the name inscribed upon it aloud: "Dolores Escoto."

"So I am called, and I am from the City of Mexico." There was something about the woman which impelled Miss Habersham to grant her request.

"Come this way, please."

Katherine conducted the visitor to the library, closed the door carefully after her, and then requested the lady to be seated.

"You can speak in perfect freedom here and without danger of being overheard, or interrupted," Miss Habersham remarked, as she perceived her visitor glance with keen, curious eyes around the room.

"Miss Habersham, I am about to make a very strange proposal to you, and it may not meet your views, but whether it does or not, I must beg you to keep the matter a profound secret," the stranger said.

Katherine reflected over the matter for a moment. "Is it wise for me to give such a promise without knowing anything about the matter?" she said.

"Certainly!" the other replied, promptly. "What harm can there be in you thus binding yourself? The matter concerns only you and myself; it is our secret and it is my wish that it should remain so."

Katherine could not see that there was any harm in giving the promise, and so she complied with the request.

"Thank you, I am much obliged. Now I am going to speak to you in the frankest, freest manner possible, and I hope you will be equally frank with me."

"I will try to be," Katherine replied, her curiosity excited by this mysterious beginning.

"I have come to you about this man who now calls himself Jack Escobedo."

Katherine uttered an exclamation of surprise, for this announcement was entirely unexpected.

"You are amazed, I see," the Mexican woman remarked, with a smile. "You did not expect to hear me mention that name."

"No, I did not," the other responded, now on her guard, for she could not imagine what was the woman's object.

"Yes, I come to speak to you of the man now known as Jack Escobedo, but who along the line of the Rio Grande was known as Jackson Blake—by many called the Fresh of 'Frisco—and whose right name is George Hardy."

"Ah, you know then that he is George Hardy?" inquired Katherine, eagerly.

"No, of my own knowledge I do not," the other replied. "I know that he is Jackson Blake, and I assume that you, and the other witnesses, who, on his examination, swore that he was the George Hardy who fled from New York fifteen years ago, did not make any mistake, despite the evidence of the Californians to the contrary."

"You were present at the examination then."

"Oh, yes, I take a great interest in this Fresh of 'Frisco!" and the woman laughed, a harsh, metallic laugh, in which there was no merriment.

"You are no friend of his!" exclaimed Katherine, abruptly, as the conviction came to her.

"A friend to him!" cried the Mexican woman, her brilliant black eyes flashing angry fires. "Indeed I am not, nor does there exist upon this earth a creature who hates him with a more bitter, unending hatred than she who now tells you this!"

"I judged from the way you spoke that you bore him no good will."

"And I fancy that, although there was a time when you and he had some soft passages together, you now seek to be revenged upon him?"

"Yes, I do!" cried Katherine, hoarsely, her dark eyes flashing.

"But the present prospect is not favorable," the visitor remarked. "Your attempt to send this man to the State Prison is not likely to be a success. You see I have kept a close watch upon the proceedings, and it is the general opinion that the district attorney will never dare to bring the case to trial unless he secures far stronger evidence than that which has been brought forward."

"Yes, I presume it is true that the chances are against a conviction," Katherine remarked, in a reluctant way, as though she hated to make the admission.

"Is your desire for vengeance upon this man so strong that you would be willing to serve it by foul and underhand means, if it cannot be gained in any other way?" the Mexican woman asked, sinking her voice as though she did not wish the walls even to overhear the question.

Katherine pondered over the matter for a few moments, her eyes fixed upon the floor, her face

dark and gloomy, an ugly frown wrinkling her brows.

At last, with a sudden motion, she raised her head, fixed her eyes full upon the face of her visitor and said:

"Yes, I would not hesitate for a moment in taking vengeance, no matter how I secured it!"

"Good! there is the right ring in your tones!"

The other exclaimed, with an air of satisfaction. "I see you hate this man in the right way. I have no patience with the woman who bates and yet lacks the courage to accept vengeance when it is offered to her. I too hate this man, and I would not grudge either time or trouble to satisfy that hatred."

"Has there been a love affair between you and Hardy?" Katherine asked, her curiosity excited. "And do you seek revenge upon him on that account?"

The Mexican woman laughed scornfully.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "There has never been any love lost between this Fresh of 'Frisco and myself. I have always hated the man from the time I first set eyes upon him; instinctively I felt that he was fated to make trouble for me, and after events showed that my presentiment was truth itself. His hands are red with the blood of those near and dear to me; and I will never rest satisfied until I have crushed him to the very earth! All the way from the line of the Rio Grande I have followed him; and to those who do not know the nature of the women of my race it would seem as if it was an unequal fight—that I would have no chance to wage successful battle against him, but the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong."

"Yes, that is true; and many a time a woman's cunning is more than a match for a man's strength," Katherine observed.

"True, and upon that idea I have proceeded. I knew that in an open war I could not hope to harm him; my blows must be dealt in the dark, and by the hands of men without scruples, and so I have allied myself with a band of law-breakers, who care not what they do so long as they are well paid for their services. The aid of this band I offer to you, if you care to avail yourself of them. Of course, they must be well paid, for such men work only for money and their services are costly."

"I care not for that!" Katherine exclaimed.

"I am willing to pay for vengeance." Miss Habersham was worth some thirty odd thousand dollars in her own right. Her father allowed her a liberal sum yearly, and she seldom spent one-half of it, for her persevering suitor, Mr. Soaper, supplied her with about everything she needed, so she was amply supplied with the sinews of war to enter upon a campaign of this sort, without having to apply to her father.

"My idea is, with the aid of these scoundrels, who are men that will not shirk from any crime, to attack Escobedo first in his pocket. He, through his wife, is worth millions. I want to wrest some of the wealth from him, for it is in such a shape that it can be got at; after that, I want to lay a trap so as to make him appear to the world as a villainous scoundrel, and then, when ruined and disgraced, my final blow will be at his life, although it would give me better satisfaction if I could arrange it so that the rest of his existence should be spent in lingering torments."

"I am with you heart and soul!" Miss Habersham declared.

"I am glad of it! I am planning a scheme in which I want you to play a part, and by it we can make a point."

"I will do all in my power."

"In a week then, expect me, and I will explain fully," the Mexican woman remarked, rising to depart. "Be satisfied you shall have vengeance!"

A few more unimportant words and the interview ended.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN OFFER.

MARGARET ESCOBEDO and her devoted companion, Pauline Melville, sat in a summer-house which crowned the bluff on the river side of the extensive grounds of the magnificent mansion which Jack Escobedo had bought near the village of Tarrytown on the Hudson.

It was about as fine an estate as could be found along the historic river, renowned for its beautiful estates, the abodes of the New York money kings.

From the summer-house a magnificent view of the river could be obtained, and the two girls, sitting within the rustic edifice, were feasting their eyes on the beautiful view.

"A penny for your thoughts, Margaret, dear!" exclaimed the lively Pauline abruptly.

"I don't really think they are worth even so small a sum," the other responded. "I was just meditating upon how unstable we frail mortals are."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that; mortals are never satisfied," Pauline remarked. "Man never is but always to be blessed."

"How very true that is. When I got to be a grown girl, old enough to understand the world, mother used to paint bright pictures of what we would do if the Escobedo wealth was only

ours. At that time, neither mother nor I had any idea that a penny of it would come to either one of us.

"We were not at all dissatisfied with our lot, mind you, for we had enough to enable us to live in comfort, if not in luxury, but we amused ourselves by speculating what we would do if we were worth millions."

"But now that you have got the money you find that the possession of it does not make you any happier than before."

"No, not as happy," Margaret replied with a sad smile. "And I would cheerfully give all the Escobedo wealth to have my mother back again."

"Oh, yes, I can understand that, for I too know what it is to lose a mother."

"And then a presentiment seems to haunt me that this money will bring me no good-luck."

"Ah, my dear Margaret, I have no doubt that you could easily find plenty who would be glad to take the money and risk the luck!" Pauline declared.

"Oh, yes, no doubt; and little as I value the money, and apprehensive as I am regarding the luck which comes with it, yet I should not be willing to give it up."

"Of course, that is only natural."

"I persuaded my husband to leave the wild scenes of the West and settle here in the East, for I had an idea I would be much happier, but I am still as restless and uneasy as ever."

"I tell you what it is, Margaret dear!" her companion exclaimed, "it is lack of occupation that troubles you. When you lived with your mother, before this colossal fortune came to you, you were busy all the time; you gained your bread by honest toil, but now you have nothing in the world to do, and time hangs heavy on your hands."

"Yes, I believe you are right."

"I can propose a remedy."

"Do so."

"Make an occupation for yourself."

"How?"

"Well, you cannot very well engage in any business, and it wouldn't seem right for a wealthy woman like you to take a position, so do as the rest of the rich folks do: become a 'globe-trotter.' Go abroad, see everything that is to be seen—make the grand tour of the world. By traveling leisurely, taking your time about it, you will use up three or four years."

"The idea is an excellent one!" Margaret declared. "It was always one of my day-dreams to go abroad and see the famous places which I have read so much about, and I will speak to Jack in regard to the matter when he comes home to-night."

"I have no doubt he will be glad to go," Pauline observed. "He is always delighted to do anything that he thinks will give you pleasure. Then too after the amount of talk that this horrid trial has made I know he will be glad to go away so as to have a chance to forget it."

At this point a servant approached with the message that a lady was at the house who desired to see Miss Escobedo in private on a particular matter of business.

"Oh, yes, very particular business, no doubt!" Pauline exclaimed.

Like all people who are reputed to possess great wealth, Margaret Escobedo had her share of visitors, all of whom declared their business was most important, and who generally came with the design of interesting her in all sorts of things wherein a liberal donation of money was to play the principal part.

"I say, Margaret, you will have to make a sort of business agent out of me," Pauline declared, as the two rose to return to the house, having dispatched the servant to say that the visitor would be received.

"A business agent?"

"Yes, to receive all these visitors who are so anxious to see you on particular business, and then I will put them through a cross-examination and make them tell what they want; and as nineteen out of twenty are nothing more than genteel beggars I would send them to the right-about in short order. That is the way the men do, you know, men of importance; you don't catch them bothering to see every Tom, Dick and Harry who asks for them."

"The idea is a good one, and if you are willing to undertake the task I am sure it would save me from some disagreeable scenes, for when the suppliants tell their sad stories it is painful to be obliged to refuse, although, in a great many cases, it is plain that assistance ought not to be given until a careful examination is made."

"I will undertake the task of talking to them, and I warrant you that I will be sharp enough to discover the frauds. Shall I begin with this one?"

"No, we will both see her, and if you think she is imposing on me you can put in a word of caution."

But there was a surprise in store for Margaret Escobedo that she little expected, for when the two entered the parlor, to which the visitor had been conducted, they were amazed to see Katherine Habersham.

The banker's daughter was recognized imme-

diately by the pair, for they had attended the examination and saw her give her evidence.

Katherine gazed with curious eyes upon the woman who had taken from her the man she loved.

This was the first time she had encountered Margaret, and she could not help admitting that she was indeed very beautiful and worth any man's love.

She saw from the expression upon the face of the mistress of the mansion that she was recognized, and judged from the look that Margaret regarded her as an intruder.

"What care I?" was her mental comment. "I did not come to make a friendly call, and it makes no difference to me whether she likes or dislikes me."

"I see you know me and that saves an explanation," she said.

"Yes, I recognize you."

"I should like to have the favor of a private interview," Katherine remarked.

Margaret shook her head.

"I do not feel like granting your request."

"The business upon which I came to see you is important."

"You can speak freely before this lady. She is to me as a sister, and I have no secrets from her."

"The matter is an important one!" Katherine urged.

"I do not feel disposed to grant your request," Margaret responded, firmly.

Katherine bit her lip; she did not want to speak before a witness, but perceiving that the other was determined she saw that she either must do so or retire, so she concluded to speak.

"Well, since it must be so I will speak. It is in regard to your husband's affair with the bank that I came."

"I do not think that we women ought to trouble ourselves about such a matter," Margaret remarked in an icy tone.

"Women can sometimes arrange such matters better than men," Katherine urged. "At any rate do me the favor to listen with patience to what I have to say."

Margaret inclined her head coldly.

"Very well; be seated and I will hear you."

Katherine had risen at the appearance of the two.

She now resumed her seat, Margaret and Pauline took chairs and then the other began:

"This charge which has been brought against your husband must be extremely disagreeable both to you and him, whether the accusation be true or false."

"Yes, there is no doubt about that."

"Well, it is all my fault. As you are aware, your husband and I were once lovers, and when I found he had deserted me for you I was crazy for revenge. Now I am sorry for what I have done. My father blames me and the bank people are angry too, for they think the matter could have been arranged quietly. Your husband is now a very wealthy man, and they argue that he would rather have settled with the bank and avoided trouble. Even now they are willing to compromise the matter. If your husband will return the money taken from the bank—it can be done through a third party, so he will not be known in the matter at all—they will make a public apology for bringing the charge against him; my father and myself, also Mr. Soaper, will admit that we have come to the conclusion we have been deceived by a striking resemblance, but now we are satisfied that your husband is not the George Hardy who fled from New York fifteen years ago."

"It seems to me that you are proposing a very strange thing!" Margaret exclaimed. "If you are willing to publicly make acknowledgment that he is not George Hardy, by what right do you ask him to pay back the money which the bank claims George Hardy took? Or are you all willing to utter a lie for the sake of getting the money?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FRESH REFUSES.

CONTEMPTUOUS indeed was the tone in which Margaret spoke, and Miss Habersham was irritated by it, but she had determined beforehand not to allow herself to be angered, for she had anticipated that it would not be all plain sailing.

"That is a matter that concerns the consciences of the people who are ready to declare that they made a mistake," she replied, coldly. "That subject ought not to trouble you at all. The point for you to consider is this: Will the public exoneration of your husband from the charge that has been brought against him be worth the money which it will cost him?"

"But by giving the money he virtually admits that he is the man who robbed the bank!" Margaret exclaimed. She knew little of the law, but her common sense told her that this was correct.

"Oh, no; being a very wealthy man, he pays the money rather than be bothered by the matter," Katherine explained. Besides, no one but ourselves, the parties interested, will know aught of the matter. My father will act for the

bank, and even the lawyers of the institution will know nothing of it.

"At present there is a stain upon your husband's name, and it can only be removed by some such course as I suggest. If you like, you can arrange the matter without his knowledge," Katherine suggested, artfully.

An indignant flush came over Margaret's pale face.

"You must think very meanly of me, madam, to imagine for a single instant that I would do anything of the kind!" she exclaimed.

"The thought came to me and I uttered it," the other replied, affecting an indifferent air, although she was furiously angry at the rebuke.

"I have no secrets from my husband. I will tell him of your proposal, although I have no thought that it will be acceptable to him."

"Well, no harm can come from it at all events," Katherine observed. "That is all I wished to say, excepting I would like you to tell your husband that I am sorry for the course I took, and if the past was to be lived over again, I most assuredly would not denounce him."

Miss Habersham rose.

"If your husband desires to come to any arrangement, you can drop me a line, and then we can attend to the matter."

"Very well," Margaret replied.

The visitor departed.

"That woman is a regular snake!" Pauline exclaimed, when Miss Habersham was gone. "I don't believe a word she says about how she would act differently if she had to go through the matter again. She is terribly angry now, although she does her best to hide it."

"Yes, I believe you are right; I place no confidence in her."

"Neither do I," Pauline exclaimed. "How can any one tell that there isn't some trick about this proposal?"

"Very true."

"Your husband says that his lawyers state that the case will not be pushed against him unless some stronger evidence is secured, and there may be some cunning trick in this matter."

"Yes, I will tell my husband about it when he returns to-night."

And Margaret was as good as her word.

The Fresh came up from the city, where he had gone to attend to some business, in time for the five o'clock dinner, and when the repast was finished, retired to the library to smoke a cigar and look over the afternoon journals; there Margaret joined him, and gave an account of the visit of Miss Habersham.

Escobedo listened attentively.

"Pauline was present," Margaret said in conclusion, "for when I discovered who my visitor was, I would not grant her a private interview, and Pauline believes there is some trick about the matter."

"The only trick, I reckon, is to get the money out of me," the Fresh replied. "I think the banker's daughter is honest enough about the matter. They have held a consultation, and come to the conclusion there is no chance for them to prove that I am George Hardy, and so they are anxious to compromise the matter. The bank, of course, is willing to do almost anything to get back the money which they have lost. That is only natural, and Habersham is anxious to have the matter settled; for he fears lest he may have left some point unguarded which the detectives can now discover, for there is no doubt in my mind that he is the man who took the eighty thousand dollars' worth of bonds. It was a cunning trick, for my flight and letter of confession, of course, fixed the crime upon me."

"Yes, and the bank officers never suspected him."

"Oh, no, he posed as the innocent victim. Some of the sharpest detectives in the country have been examining his record, but they have not succeeded in finding any proof, for the broker firm through which he used to do business are gone out of business, and their books are destroyed; but from what they can learn, Habersham's rise in the world was an extremely rapid one; no wonder he succeeded with his knowledge of the market and eighty thousand dollars to back him."

"Yes, and in order to cover up his crime, he is anxious to get you to refund the money."

"That is his idea; he reasons that as we have plenty—for with the wealth we possess we could part with even so large a sum as eighty thousand dollars without missing it—in order to be relieved of this accusation, we will pay the money, although I know that I did not take it. Possibly, for your sake, I might be induced to give the matter consideration, but for the fact that the mischief is already done, and no act on the part of the people who have accused me would make the case any better."

"But if they admitted they were satisfied they had made a mistake?"

"It would not deceive the public in the least; the people would at once jump to the conclusion that I had settled the case in some way, and then there would be more talk than ever, for it is only the guilty man who buys his freedom from prosecution; the innocent one defies his foes; all the world then would come to the be-

lief that I really had taken the eighty thousand dollars, and our last state would be worse than the first."

"Yes, you are right," Margaret remarked. "I did not argue the case as you have just done, but I came to the same opinion, and I told Miss Habersham, as soon as she made the proposition, that I did not think it could be entertained."

"Oh, no, we must fight it out!" the Fresh exclaimed. "I would rather spend the eighty thousand dollars in attempting to bring the crime home to the real criminal, than yield it to the bank."

"For the world at large I care nothing! If it were not for you, Margaret, I would not turn upon my heel to answer my foes, but for your sake I want people to think I am a gentleman and an honest man."

"As you are, beyond the shadow of a doubt!" Margaret exclaimed, winding her soft arms around him, lovingly.

"Yes, to you," he replied, returning the caress. "But, somehow, the world usually has had a bad opinion of me. On the Pacific Slope, and in the wilds of the West, I was always painted more black than I really was. I thought that when we came East I should leave the old reputation behind me, but I fancy that it is going to stick to me like my shadow, and, no matter where I go, I will not be able to get away from it."

"I anticipated that this bank business would come up, for I have not changed so greatly in these years as to be beyond recognition, and I intended to square the account by refunding the couple of thousand odd that the bank was out, but when it comes to eighty thousand, why, that is a little too much to pay on another man's account, and therefore I have fought."

"And you have acted rightly!" Margaret declared. "My love for you has not made me blind. I am competent to decide the question. You acted like a hero in taking upon your shoulders another man's fault, and I am sure, no matter what the world may say of you, that you have not been to blame for the life you have been forced to lead."

"Yes, but it is a shame to have any of the stigma attached to you; if you remember, I explained to you before we were married that it was the general impression that I wasn't any better than I ought to be, and that was the reason I hesitated when the wish came to me to woo you; but I didn't really think that mud was going to be thrown at me here in the East."

"We are not obliged to stay here!" Margaret exclaimed. "We have plenty of money, and can go where we like. Pauline was saying to-day what an enjoyable trip it would be for us to make the tour around the world, and by taking our time we could occupy five years."

"Very true; the idea is an excellent one!" the Fresh exclaimed. "And, possibly, somewhere abroad we might find a spot which would suit us for a home."

"Yes, there is nothing to keep us here; I should be satisfied to go with you anywhere."

"That was a brilliant idea of Pauline's and it seems to me that if I put the ocean between me and this land where my early deeds are rising to confound me, I can find some place where neither George Hardy or Jackson Blake, the Fresh of 'Frisco, has ever been heard of; perhaps there will be a charm in the restless waters of old ocean, and the evil reputation which has followed me for so long, will not be able to cross the mighty deep."

And it was settled that as soon as the case was arranged so Escobedo could depart, a European trip would be made.

The Fresh of 'Frisco was trying to escape from himself.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN COUNCIL.

AND now we will transport the reader again to the isolated house by the banks of the Hudson River, a little below the town of Yonkers, where the meeting between the young Creole and the captain of the organized band of law-breakers had taken place.

Captain White and Mr. Moses were seated in the room, fully disguised, as on the night when we first introduced them to the reader.

The captain consulted his watch.

"Half-past eight," he said. "It is about time our man put in an appearance," he remarked.

"Hardly," Moses replied, speaking now without the slightest trace of a Jewish accent. "He is to meet the Preacher at the Grand Central Depot at eight o'clock, and it will take them more than a half an hour to get out here."

"Yes, that is true. By the way, what do you think of this new pal?"

"He is about as sharp as they make 'em!" Moses exclaimed, with an approving nod. "And I should not be surprised if with his aid we succeeded in making a big haul."

"We haven't made much progress yet," the captain remarked, as if he was a little doubtful about the matter.

"Ah, in an affair of this kind it does not do to be in a hurry. You must remember that we are scheming for a big thing, and we must not

expect to hop in and get away with the swag as though it was only a common, ordinary job."

"Yes, I presume I am a little impatient, and I will admit I am eager to see results. We have been engaged in this job some little time now, and as far as I can see we are not making any progress."

"You forget that we are not really in a position to judge correctly in regard to that," the other remarked. "We do not know what scheme this Robeline is working. He appears to be satisfied, and that would seem to show that everything is going on all right."

"Yes, but I say, don't you think the fellow ought to take us into his confidence, so that we would know what we are about? I do not exactly like this working in the dark," the captain grumbled.

"Oh, come now, we have no cause to be dissatisfied," Moses replied. "In good time he will explain. I am sure the fellow has acted in the most liberal manner. He wanted certain things done. 'This will cost money,' you said. 'How much?' said he, and when you named the sum he ponied up the cash as promptly as possible. Now that is what I call business, and from the way he goes on I am satisfied the fellow knows what he is about, and when the thing is ripe he will let us in for a big success."

The conversation at this point was interrupted by the ringing of a bell.

This retired retreat of the gang was well arranged to guard against a surprise.

The moment a foot was placed upon the lowest steps of either the stoops in front or rear it caused a bell to sound within the house so that the inmates had ample warning of visitors.

"There he is now, I suppose," the captain remarked.

"Very likely," said Moses.

The supposition was correct, for in a few moments the Creole entered the room.

Salutations were exchanged and Robeline helped himself to a chair.

"Anything new?" he asked.

"Nothing that we know of," Captain White replied.

"Have you succeeded in placing a good man in the Escobedo mansion?"

"Oh, yes, but I thought you knew that."

"No, on our last meeting you said everything was working all right, and you expected to get the man into the house in a day or two."

"Oh, excuse me; then there is something new," said the captain. "It is odd that I should get mixed up about the matter, for it was my impression that I had made a report to you."

"Not yet."

"Well, we worked the trick to the queen's taste!" Captain White remarked in a satisfied tone. "Our man occupies an important office too; he is the butler."

"That is good."

"Yes, it was rather a difficult job to get him in, for there were no vacancies and so we had to make one."

"How did you manage it?"

"We laid a trap so as to get the butler discharged. We did a little detective business," the captain explained. "We examined all the male servants in the house for the purpose of ascertaining if any of them had any weak points, and we soon discovered that the butler was fond of taking a glass or two at a certain saloon in Tarrytown. He was an Englishman and liked his beer; so we sent a couple of jolly fellows to make his acquaintance, and they led him into temptation and the third time he went home rather the worse for liquor the master of the house discovered it and he was discharged. Our man was quick to apply for the situation, backed by the best kind of recommendations, and he secured it without trouble."

"It was cleverly worked," the Creole observed.

"Yes, it was done in a scientific manner," the gang chief replied.

"And what is his report in regard to the valuables?" Robeline asked.

"Not encouraging," the captain replied.

"Mine gootness, no!" Mr. Moses exclaimed, now using the strong Jewish accent. "Mine tear frien, I fear we will not be able to do anything."

"There must be plenty of valuables in the house," the Creole observed.

"Oh, yes, there are, but the trouble is to get at them," the captain answered.

"Yes, I see; well, we must set our wits to work. Mrs. Escobedo has some valuable diamonds."

"So our man says, and he estimates that they are worth twenty odd thousand dollars, and he is a good judge in such matters," White remarked.

"The silver must be valuable too," said the Creole.

"About five hundred dollars' worth, and it is placed in a safe every night which Mrs. Escobedo attends to seeing is securely locked."

"And her diamonds and other jewelry?"

"Kept in a safe in her bedroom."

"I have an idea too that there is usually considerable money in the house," Robeline observed, thoughtfully.

"That is the conclusion to which our man came."

Of course it is a difficult matter for him to ascertain much about what is in this safe in Mrs. Escobedo's bedroom, but from the gossip of the women servants, who have access to the room, he is led to believe that in addition to Mrs. Escobedo's jewelry and a good sum of money the safe also contains a quantity of bonds, and as far as our agent could get at the matter it seems as if the bonds were Government bonds."

The Creole pondered over the matter for a few moments, then said:

"I do not believe that there are many bonds in the safe. About all Mrs. Escobedo's money is in Government bonds, but they are held by one of the safe deposit companies."

Both Captain White and Mr. Moses shook their heads.

"Not much chance to get at valuables thus guarded," the captain remarked.

"It would be difficult," the Creole assented.

"I have just been trying to work a scheme to get at some of the bonds but it has come to naught."

The others looked surprised.

"We would like to hear the particulars if you don't mind," the captain observed.

"Oh, no, although it has failed. Are you posted in regard to this case of the Beaver National Bank against Jack Escobedo?"

"Yes, yes, we always attend matinees of that kind, eh, Moses?"

"You must bet your boots, my tear!"

"Well, I had an agent of mine call upon Miss Habershaw and suggest to her to make a proposition to Escobedo to compromise the matter upon his paying over to her, for the bank, the eighty thousand dollars. If he had consented, I would have arranged the matter so she would have had to keep the money in her house over night and we would have gobbled it."

The two men stared; the magnitude of the scheme almost took their breath away.

"Eighty thousand dollars!" Captain White exclaimed. "Wouldn't that have been a tidy bit of swag to collar?"

"Mine gootness! it makes mine mouth water!" Mr. Moses declared.

And then the pair looked at the Creole in a way that clearly showed he had taken a much higher rank in their estimation than he had before occupied.

"It did not work, for Escobedo would not pay the money."

"Of course not, and that was the only weak spot in your magnificent scheme," Captain White observed. "I watched the case carefully, and as I have had considerable experience in law courts"—and here the captain paused to chuckle—in which Mr. Moses joined—both evidently under the impression that a good thing had been said—"I consider myself a pretty good judge, and my opinion is, that though there is no doubt that Escobedo is George Hardy—although the California *alibi* business was worked so well that not one jury out of a thousand would go against it—yet he didn't take the bonds; it is dollars to cents that Habersham got away with them, although he managed the affair so cleverly that nobody will ever be able to prove it."

"I have not given the matter a thought, for I take no interest in it," Robeline observed. "But now to business. It is important for the success of our plans that we get a female agent into the house."

"Well, let me see; females that you can depend upon in such a matter as this are not common," Captain White observed.

"Oh, that is all right; I have the woman. A clever, capable girl, good appearance, speaks English, French and Spanish, can act as a lady's maid, or in most any genteel capacity. Do you think you could arrange to introduce her into the house?"

"Oh, yes," the captain replied, immediately.

"Our man, the butler, reported to me that he could introduce a female as his assistant if it was necessary, but as I had no good woman for the position I told him I did not think I would bother with it."

"Notify him as soon as possible that you have a woman whom you wish to put in."

"I will arrange the matter the first thing in the morning," Captain White replied. "Let your woman make application in the afternoon and she will be engaged."

"Very well; her name is Celeste Dufarge."

"All right, I will post him."

"With her aid I hope to work the safes and secure their contents."

"When you are ready warn me and I will give you some first-class men who will do the job in a workman-like manner."

The Creole said he would, and a few more unimportant words ended the interview.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE FEMALE SPY.

THE new butler of the Escobedo mansion was a middle-aged, well-built, English-looking man, with a smooth, stolid face, a very respectful manner and a low, pleasant voice.

The other servants unanimously declared him to be as nice a gentleman as they had ever met, so polite, so agreeable, so willing to oblige;

in fact, the new butler seemed desirous of doing all in his power to make his associates comfortable.

He was a man of distinction too and had held positions in some of the best New York families and in London he had served dukes and lords and so was used to mixing with the best society.

A well-posted detective officer from the Central Office would have given this pleasant-mannered, mild-spoken fellow quite a different character, though, for he would have recognized in this respectable-appearing James Cathcart, late of the Duke of Devonshire's service, London, England, Lightning Jim, the notorious "cracksman" reported to be the most experienced safe-robbler in the country.

Not a suspicion though had any of the inmates of the Escobedo mansion that he was aught but what he represented himself to be.

The disguised cracksman had been duly warned that a confederate would apply for a situation that particular afternoon, and he was on the lookout; and in order to prepare the way for her coming he informed Mrs. Escobedo that he expected a young woman to call that day with a view to securing the situation.

"I don't know her personally, ma'am," he explained. "I heard of her from a friend of mine, Mr. Vanderbilt's steward, and you can rely upon anything he says, for he is a gentleman of vast experience, and then the young woman brings first-class references."

Mrs. Escobedo expressed herself as being satisfied, and so the coast was clear for the reception of the new-comer.

The butler had a little room, which he used as a sort of office, on the first floor, and he gave orders to the footman, who had charge of the front door, to show the young woman in there when she came.

Behold this wolf in sheep's clothing there in his sanctum waiting for the arrival of the female who was to act as his confederate.

"I hope the captain has been careful to pick out a first-class dame," he soliloquized. "For after the stunning recommendation I have given her, it will be awkward for me if she is not up to the mark. I presume it will be some old acquaintance, for I am pretty well posted, and know about all the females in the country who are on the 'cross.'"

A little after two o'clock the young woman arrived and was conducted to the butler's apartment.

Cathcart invited her to take a chair, closed the door carefully, and then examined her with a curious eye.

He had been wrong in his supposition in regard to her being an old acquaintance, for she was a stranger, and Lightning Jim, who prided himself upon being an excellent judge of character, could not help admitting that she was "got up" in a manner calculated to deceive the most experienced observer.

She was above the medium height and well-proportioned, had a rather masculine face and was decidedly attractive-looking. Her eyes were dark, but her hair light, and she wore a curly, flappy "bang," which covered the greater part of her forehead.

The experienced criminal, an adept at all sorts of disguises, understood at once that the hair was worn in this fashion in order to change the expression of her face, for if it had been brushed back from the temples she would have looked altogether different.

She was attired in a dark dress, wore a plain hat, and in everything appeared to be as neat as wax.

"You are the young woman who desires to secure the situation?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"What is your name?"

"Celeste Dufarge."

"French, eh?"

"By descent only; I am American born."

"You have had experience?"

"Yes, sir, here are my recommendations," and she handed him three letters. "You will notice that they all give me a good character."

"Yes, yes, I see," and Lightning Jim glanced over them, carelessly. "These speak very well of you." Then he glanced at the door, to be sure it was tightly shut, leaned toward her and said in a low tone. "What does Captain White think of you?"

"That I am true blue and can be trusted to carry out any order that may be given me," the woman replied, promptly, a knowing smile upon her face.

"How long have you been on the cross? I don't remember to have ever encountered you before and yet I have been a pretty extensive traveler."

"Never been much in the South though, I suspect."

"Well, no, I can't say that I have, although I have operated on a large scale in the West, but St. Louis is as far south as I have ever gone."

"New Orleans has been my home for quite a number of years; in fact, I was born and raised there, and that is how I came to speak both French and Spanish in addition to English."

"I presume the South has got too hot to hold you, and so you came North to try your luck."

"Yes, I had the misfortune to make a few blunders, and when one becomes known to the police, you know, then the game is up."

"Certainly; particularly in a small city. There is no chance for gentlemen and ladies in our line of business in small places; only a metropolis gives us scope enough to act."

"Undoubtedly that is the truth."

"Now this lay we are working on is a mighty particular one, and though I am one of the oldest cracksmen in the profession, and reported to be an expert in delicate jobs, yet, I must say, I don't think I ever struck a more difficult case than this one."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, the silver is in a safe in the dining-room; that might be got at, although the safe is one of the newest patterns and supposed to be burglar proof, but that is all in my eye and Betty Martin!" the Englishman declared in contempt. "There never was a safe manufactured and never will be, to my thinking, that an expert cracksmen, who is provided with the proper tools, cannot open."

"What difficulties are there then in the way?" the woman asked.

"The house is so deuced well-guarded," Lightning Jim explained. "There are burglar alarms attached to each door and window, and it is the best arrangement of the kind that I ever came across, for it is impossible to tamper with the wires in any way without giving an alarm. I have had considerable experience with this sort of thing, you know, and think I am a judge. Then, too, Mr. and Mrs. Escobedo's bedroom is exactly over the dining-room and any noise in the dining-room in the dead of the night would be apt to awaken them, and this Escobedo would be an ugly man to deal with. He is from Texas and has a fine collection of fire-arms; he knows how to use the weapons, too, like the majority of Texans, and if he got after a man with his revolvers, it would be apt to be, good-by, John!"

"Oh, he is a dangerous man, then?" the woman asked, with an appearance of great interest.

"You bet he is!" Lightning Jim declared emphatically. "And I would rather have ten average citizens after me than this one man! I have had experience in this line. I have, on a few occasions, had the ill luck to wake up the gentleman of the house, when I have been making a nocturnal call, without standing upon the ceremony of ringing the front door-bell, and they have used me for a target, but, bless you! none of the bullets ever came within a yard of me, but I would not be willing to allow this Escobedo to take one crack at me for ten thousand dollars, for he is a dead shot and would lay me out, sure! He practices nearly every day when he is home, with his pistols, and the shots he makes are marvelous."

"The game must be arranged then so that the swag can be got at without an alarm being created," the woman remarked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, and to my thinking it will be an easy job."

"Captain White is a long-headed man and he has done some good jobs in his time," the other remarked.

"Very true."

"And after we have ascertained exactly how the land lies we may be able to devise some plan to get at the valuables."

"Yes, the captain has done good work but if he succeeds in cracking this crib it will be the biggest thing of the kind that ever was planned!" the old professional declared.

"He will find a way," the woman remarked, confidently.

"Well, I hope so. But to return to business. You are engaged. Come with me and I will introduce you to the housekeeper."

And this the butler proceeded to do.

The new arrival created a favorable impression, and it did not take her long to get on good terms with the rest of the servants, who agreed that she was "real nice!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE STROKE OF THE REAPER.

AND now two weeks more elapse.

In the interim, Celeste Dufarge, as the newcomer in the Escobedo mansion called herself, had won golden opinions from all the domestics. Mr. and Mrs. Escobedo knew but little of her, for her duties did not bring her in contact with the master and mistress of the mansion.

They knew, of course, that the butler had an assistant, a quiet, retiring girl with a foreign air, but that was about all.

On this particular night on which we again take up the thread of our story, Mr. and Mrs. Escobedo, accompanied by Miss Melville, had gone to New York to the opera.

They returned by the theater-train, their carriage met them at the station, and it was after midnight when they arrived at the mansion.

A luncheon had been prepared, and the butler attended to the serving of it in person.

After it was dispatched, the party retired to rest.

Margaret had been suffering from a severe cold for a few days, and the doctor had ordered medicine, a dose of which she usually took be-

fore going to bed, and on this occasion she asked her husband to hand it to her.

"You will find it on the bureau," she said.

He complied with the request, and, after she had taken the draught, remarked:

"I do not believe it will do you much good, taken so soon after eating."

"Why didn't you say that before I took it?" she asked. "I never thought, but I do not suppose it will do me any harm."

"Oh, no, that is not likely."

This ended the conversation, and as they were both tired after their journey, they were soon asleep.

But in a short time Margaret awoke, suffering great pain.

"What is the matter, dear?" the Fresh asked; always a light sleeper, he had been roused from his slumbers by his wife's uneasy movements.

"Oh, I am suffering such terrible pain!" she replied.

Escobedo sprung out of bed and turned up the gas, which at night was always kept burning. Margaret was deathly pale, and great drops of perspiration stood upon her forehead.

One glance at her face told the Fresh that her case was a serious one.

"You must have a doctor right away!" he exclaimed, proceeding to dress with all possible haste.

"Oh, yes, I am in terrible pain. I feel as if I was on fire!" she moaned.

"I will go for the doctor myself, so as to be sure of getting him to come quickly!" the Fresh cried.

It did not take him many minutes to dress, and then he alarmed the house.

Miss Melville and the housekeeper came in haste to attend to the suffering woman, while Escobedo hurried to the stables, where the coachman and hostler slept.

They were roused from their slumbers in a hurry, the fleetest horse in the stable was harnessed to a buggy, and soon the Fresh was on the road to Tarrytown.

There was considerable trouble in getting a doctor.

The physician whom Margaret had consulted in regard to her cold was out on a sick call and Escobedo was obliged to hunt for another.

The second physician was sick in bed himself, and the third one he had great difficulty in rousing.

At last though he took the homeward road with the doctor.

Of course he could give but little information in regard to the nature or cause of the attack.

The doctor though quickly jumped to a conclusion when he learned the particulars, although he did not deem it wise to impart it to the husband.

"Hearty supper—plenty of wine, probably, then medicine on top of it—make a horse sick," was the physician's thought.

The whip was not spared and the horse trotted as though he knew that a human life was at stake.

The mansion was reached at last; lights were flashing from all the windows, for the sudden attack had roused every one within the house.

The pair were met at the entrance to the bedroom by Pauline, her eyes red with weeping.

"You are too late!" she cried in an agony of grief. "It is all over!" And then she fell into a fit of hysterics and was carried away by the female servants.

It was true.

Margaret Escobedo was dead!

For a moment the Fresh stood motionless, stunned by the sudden and unexpected blow, for although he knew that Margaret was very ill when he departed, yet he had not anticipated the coming of the dark angel so soon.

Jack Escobedo though was not a man to break even under such a heavy blow as this.

The readers who have followed his fortunes thus far know that he was a man who received both fortune's smiles and frowns with calm philosophy.

And though his grief was great, yet man of ice and iron as he was he did not betray by his bearing how deeply he was affected.

"This is terrible!" he exclaimed with a heavy sigh as with the doctor he approached the bed on which, white as the sheet upon which she lay, was stretched the mortal remains of beautiful Margaret Escobedo.

She had died in awful pain, struggling hard for her life; this was apparent from her distorted features.

"This is very strange," muttered the doctor, after making a careful examination and convincing himself that the woman was really dead and not in a trance. "I do not understand it at all!" he continued. "Did I not understand you to say that all that seemed to trouble her was a slight cold?"

"Yes, that was all; she made no complaint until about an hour ago she woke me from my sleep and complained of cramps in her stomach. Then, perceiving that she really was seriously ill I hurried to procure medical assistance."

"Very strange—very strange," muttered the doctor evidently perplexed. "Doctor Parker prescribed for her, I believe?"

"Yes, merely a simple cough medicine; here

it is." And the Fresh gave the bottle to the physician.

The other sampled the medicine with his tongue.

"It seems to be about the usual thing," he said. "I don't see how this could have caused death."

"Why, she has been taking it for three days!" Escobedo exclaimed. "You can see that about half the bottle has been used."

"And never produced any ill result?"

"Not the slightest—no more effect upon her, apparently, than so much water, except that it seemed to relieve the cold somewhat."

"I don't understand it at all!"

At this moment Doctor Parker himself made his appearance, a stout, elderly gentleman with a brisk, determined way.

"Bless my soul! what is this I hear—Mrs. Escobedo dead?" he exclaimed, as he hurried into the room.

"Yes, died before I could get a doctor here," the Fresh answered, and then he explained the affair.

"The moment I got home I was told you had been after me, and so I came immediately," Doctor Parker said.

He approached the bed and carefully examined the hapless Margaret; then he shook his head and an extremely grave expression came over his rugged features.

"Mr. Escobedo, have the kindness to order the room cleared so that you, Doctor Jones and myself can hold a consultation," he asked.

This was done.

When the three were alone, the doctor shook his head and remarked gravely:

"Gentlemen, it is my unpleasant duty to announce to you that I believe there has been foul play in this matter. I do not think, Mr. Escobedo, that your wife has come to her death by a natural cause."

"Doctor Parker has uttered the suspicion which has entered my mind," the other physician observed.

"Gentlemen, I agree with you that it does seem extremely strange," the Fresh observed. "I cannot see any reason for this attack. We attended the opera to-night, and, with the exception of a slight cold, my wife seemed to be as well as I have ever known her to be. She did not express herself as being particularly fatigued by the trip, and when we got home partook of a light luncheon with a great deal of relish."

"Did she eat anything liable to produce a disturbance?" Doctor Parker asked.

"No, all she took was some cold roast chicken, bread and butter, and a cup of tea; nothing at all to make her ill."

"Something wrong, Mr. Escobedo; there is something wrong, I will stake my professional reputation upon it! How did that cough mixture of mine seem to affect her?"

"Well, it appeared to help her; she took a dose just before going to bed, and after she had taken it, I remarked that perhaps it was not wise to take the medicine so soon after eating."

"It certainly would not have harmed, even if it did her no good," the doctor declared.

Then his eyes fell upon the bottle of medicine standing upon the table and he took it up.

"About half gone," he remarked. "So it could not have been the medicine, or it would have made her sick before."

"Then he applied his tongue to it as Doctor Jones had done."

"Hullo, Hullo! it seems to me as if something has been added to this!" he exclaimed. "It doesn't seem to taste exactly right."

Holding the bottle up to the light, so that the strong rays of the gas shone through it, his keen eyes detected a sediment at the bottom of the liquid.

"Mr. Escobedo, I fear that this medicine has been tampered with," he remarked in a very grave tone.

"Well, the bottle has stood here on the bureau ever since it came into the house, and no particular watch has been kept upon it; the servants, whose duties call them into the room, could have tampered with the medicine during our absence, but it seems hardly probable that any of them would do such a thing; so far as I know they are all trustworthy."

"When did your wife take medicine before this last time?"

"Just previous to dinner, about five o'clock."

"And it produced no ill effect?"

"Not the slightest."

"That shows then that the medicine was tampered with between five o'clock and midnight, for that something has been added to it I feel certain. I will have to seal this up."

This was done and then the doctor requested the other physician to take charge of it.

"Have the kindness to keep this matter quiet," Mr. Escobedo, the doctor requested. "I will notify the proper authorities at once, and if the detectives are put on the track immediately it is probable that they will succeed in detecting the perpetrator of this awful deed."

"I will see that no one leaves the house until the detectives come!" the Fresh promised, and then the doctor departed in haste.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SEARCH.

UPON reaching the village, Doctor Parker at once called into play the agency of the electric wire.

He communicated to the central police office in New York city his suspicions that a murder most foul had been committed and requested that some experienced detectives be immediately sent to the scene of the tragedy.

The coroner was also notified, and then the doctor, summoning a council of physicians proceeded to analyze the cough mixture for the purpose of discovering what ingredient had been added to it, the residue of which still remained in the bottom of the bottle.

Both of the doctors, Parker and Jones, had formed an opinion in regard to what the substance was from the effect which it produced upon the unfortunate Mrs. Escobedo, and therefore they were not astonished when the examinations disclosed that enough of a certain deadly poison had been added to the cough mixture to kill a dozen men.

The doctor had hurried this test forward so as to be able to put the detectives on the right track when they arrived.

Doctor Parker met them at the station.

They came up on the first train, the only passengers who got off at the station, and so the doctor had no difficulty in identifying them.

As it happened, the detectives assigned to this case were our old acquaintances, who had effected the arrest of Jack Escobedo, Skelly and O'Neal.

The doctor had a two-seated carriage at the depot, ready to convey the officers to the Escobedo mansion, and during the drive he explained to the detectives all that had taken place.

"Why, gentlemen," he said, in conclusion, "there was arsenic enough in that cough-mixture so that a half a spoonful would have sapped the life of the strongest man!"

"It seems to me it was a bungling sort of crime," Detective Skelly observed. "Arsenic is not generally used nowadays, for it is easily detected, and poisoners usually select some drug which will prove more of a puzzle to the doctors."

"Yes, I am aware of that fact," the physician observed. "In this case the moment I commenced to examine into the matter, I felt satisfied that the unfortunate woman had been poisoned, and that arsenic was the drug which had been used."

"It makes an easier job for us," O'Neal remarked. "The party who is stupid enough to use a poison like arsenic, we can generally get dead to rights with very little trouble."

"I know Mr. Escobedo," Detective Skelly observed. "I had a finger in the pie when he had that little trouble awhile ago. He's a nice fellow, very much of a gentleman, and this blow must come hard to him."

"Yes, I could see that he was much affected," the doctor replied. "Although he is one of the deep men who are not apt to show how badly they are hurt when wounded."

"Yes, he impressed me that way; a man who would be apt to keep a stiff upper lip, even though he was cut to the very bone," Detective Skelly said.

"You bet!" O'Neal declared, emphatically. "A man with plenty of grit and lots of backbone!"

The doctor's horse was a good one, and it did not take the trio long to reach the Escobedo mansion.

The Fresh met them at the door.

He shook hands with the detectives and said he was glad they had come, although sorry enough for the event which had brought them.

The three were ushered into the parlor and Detective Skelly carefully closed the door.

"I have unpleasant news for you, Mr. Escobedo," Doctor Parker remarked.

"Go ahead, doctor; after this weighty blow which has fallen upon me I think I can bear almost anything," the Fresh replied, calmly, but his face showed how intensely he was suffering.

"As I expected, Mr. Escobedo, that bottle of medicine had been tampered with—there was arsenic enough in it to have killed a dozen men!" the physician exclaimed.

"Great heavens! is it possible?" Escobedo cried.

"Yes, no doubt at all about the matter; your wife was poisoned!"

Escobedo remained motionless for a moment, his eyes fixed upon the floor, in deep thought.

At last he raised his head and said:

"Gentlemen, it is a complete mystery to me. I do not understand it at all. I know of no reason why any one should wish to do my wife harm. As far as I know—and of course I have a perfect knowledge of her affairs—I do not think she had an enemy in the world; most certainly none who would desire her death, and none who would profit by it."

"Your wife was very wealthy, Mr. Escobedo?" Detective Skelly remarked.

"Yes, somewhere around three millions."

"And did she—I hope you will excuse the question, if it seems at all to point to you; but I

only want to get at the truth, you know—did your wife make a will?"

"Oh, fire away with all the questions you like; I will answer every one of them. I have nothing to conceal," the Fresh exclaimed. "No, she did not leave any will. I am certain about the matter, for the subject came up after dinner yesterday. My wife read in an answer to a correspondent, in one of the daily newspapers, that if a wife, possessed of an estate, died without leaving a will, all her husband could enjoy of the property was a life interest in the real estate, and the rest of the money would go to her next of kin. She asked me if that was correct, and I told her it probably was, although I knew but little about such matters, but the newspaper would not be apt to say so if it was not the truth."

"Then she made the remark, 'I will have a will drawn out right away, for if anything should happen to me, I want you to have all I possess.'"

"I replied that she need not bother herself about it, for she was likely to outlive me, and if she did not, I was not particularly anxious about the money."

"Miss Melville, my wife's companion, was present and heard the conversation, and she remarked that she thought my wife ought to make a will, and not allow her money to go to strangers who had never done anything for her, and to be sure when she drew it out to leave her—Miss Melville, you understand—a good, fat sum, so she would be independent."

"This was a joke, of course, but my wife took it seriously and said she certainly would, and if she lived another week the will would be signed."

"That was yesterday, only some six or seven hours before the blow fell which stole her life away, so you see there is no will, and if any suspicion is in your minds, gentlemen, that I had ought to do with my poor girl's death, I trust you will see that I had every reason in the world to wish her to live, and that I could not profit by her death."

All three hastened to assure Mr. Escobedo that their minds harbored no suspicion against him.

"Of course, the rule in all such cases is to find out at the beginning who will be benefited by the crime," Detective Skelly explained.

"When that is discovered, it is generally an easy matter to pitch upon the guilty party."

"Well, in this affair there is no one person who will be greatly benefited," the Fresh replied. "My wife's relations are all in Texas and Mexico, a hundred or two of them, all on the father's side, and with so vast a number, when the real estate, which is worth about a million—the life interest of which I will hold—is taken out, there will not be a large fortune to go to any one heir. And, as far as I can see, it would be an impossibility for any of these remote relatives to have had a hand in this crime."

"Well, it certainly does look that way," Detective Skelly replied, slowly, evidently perplexed.

"No one else had anything to gain by your wife's death?" the doctor asked.

"Not a soul that I know of, and I am familiar with all her affairs, for I attended to the business in person. When she decided to sell out in Texas and come East to live, I sold all the land I could possibly dispose of at anywhere near its value. There was considerable that could not be sold for want of a purchaser, and that, with this place, is worth about a million. The rest of her fortune I invested in United States bonds, for I sought a safe investment for the money, one where she would be sure of both interest and principal," the Fresh explained.

"Where are these bonds?" Detective Skelly asked.

"There is a couple of thousand dollars worth in the safe up-stairs in our bedroom, and the rest are in the hands of the Safe Deposit Company."

"Held to whose order?" asked Skelly, carelessly, as though he attached no importance to the question.

"To Mrs. Margaret Escobedo's; the company do not even know me in the transaction. I had her attend to the affair in person, and I could not touch a bond without her written order."

"Well, my trap didn't catch you, did it?" the detective observed, with a laugh. "I guess you are all right, Mr. Escobedo, and now will you summon the servants so I can take a look at them?"

"Certainly."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A RECOGNITION.

THE Fresh gave orders for the servants of the mansion to assemble in the drawing-room, and the domestics, much surprised at the command, flocked into the apartment.

Then the two detectives quietly sauntered into the room.

The servants had no suspicions that these two quiet-looking gentlemen were officers in plain clothes, with the exception of the butler.

Both the detectives were old acquaintances, but as he had not seen them for a couple of

years—having been operating in the West—he was in hopes that he would not be recognized.

One of the strong points of a good detective officer, though, is the ability to remember faces, and although Cathcart had changed considerably since the pair had last seen him, yet no sooner did their eyes fall upon his face, than a look of recognition appeared on their features.

"Hello, Jim, are you here?" Detective Skelly exclaimed. "Well, you are about the last man I expected to see."

Cathcart put on a bold front and assumed an innocent look of surprise.

"I beg your pardon, sir, hav'n't you made some mistake?" he said, fawningly.

"Oh, no, no mistake, and you know it, well enough. Walk into the parlor, Jim, and tell Mr. Escobedo that I asked you to step in there so as to have a talk with you."

"Certainly, sir," responded the other, as pleasantly as possible, resolved to put a good face on the matter, and he proceeded to the parlor where he delivered his message.

This was done so quietly and in such a matter-of-fact way that none of the rest, with the exception of the butler's confederate, Celeste Dufarge, suspected that aught was amiss.

She understood that the detectives had spotted the crook, but between her firm-set-teeth came the muttered observation.

"Little good will it do them!"

There wasn't anything suspicious about the rest of the servants, as a careful inspection revealed, and the detectives followed the butler to the parlor.

Again the doors were closed and Detective Skelly, addressing Mr. Escobedo, asked:

"Who is this man?"

"That is the butler, James Cathcart," the Fresh answered, somewhat astonished, for he suspected that suspicion in some way attached to him.

"Well, you are not sailing under false colors, are you Jim?" Detective Skelly asked.

"Oh, no, sir, you will find I am all right," replied the crook, in an extremely obsequious manner. "I can refer you to Mr. Escobedo here; I feel sure he will give me the best of characters, and tell you that since I have been in his employ I have served him faithfully."

"Yes, I can vouch that he has given complete satisfaction since he has been here," the master of the mansion replied.

"You must have played your part pretty well, Jim, although you always were a good actor—so good that it is a wonder that you never tried the stage where your talents would be sure to be appreciated," the detective remarked.

"I say, Mr. Skelly, I hope you are not going to rake up any old matters, you know!" Cathcart exclaimed, in an appealing way. "It will not do any good. The gentleman tells you that he has had no cause of complaint, and I don't see why you want to bother about me at all."

"Oh, you are too modest, Jim!" Detective Skelly replied, mercilessly. "You must not attempt to hide your light under a bushel—a man of genius like yourself!"

"You may not have been aware of it, Mr. Escobedo, but you have one of the most distinguished men in the country in his line in your service, and as he has bashfully neglected to introduce himself I must repair the omission."

"Oh, come, Mr. Skelly, let up now, won't you?" the crook exclaimed.

"This, Mr. Escobedo, this gentleman, known to you as James Cathcart, your attentive and diligent butler, is one of the most celebrated cracksmen or 'High Toby' men in the country," explained the officer. "There is hardly a big city in the States, to say nothing of those across the water—which has not tendered him its hospitalities in the shape of the strongest cell its jail contained, and a good many of them were not strong enough to detain this gentleman for any length of time. His pictures adorn all the Rogues' Galleries, and Lightning Jim bears the reputation of being as expert a thief as ever cracked a crib in this country."

Escobedo was amazed, as was also the doctor.

"Is it possible?" the Fresh exclaimed.

The denunciation did not 'phase' the old cracksmen. He merely assumed an injured air and said:

"Yes, that is the way it goes! Let a man get in trouble once and the police are always ready to hunt him down like a dog! I am on the square now, Mr. Skelly, I want you to understand, and when a fellow is trying to lead an honest life, I think you might let him alone."

"Oh, yes, you are leading an honest life, so as to be able to spy out the land and make arrangements to get away with a big hoodle, then you will turn cracksmen soon enough!" the detective exclaimed in derision. "But we are onto your game, Jim, and the jig is up!"

"So help me, Bob! I ain't working any game!" the man declared.

"No, for you have worked it already, but we have got you dead to rights this time."

"I give you my word, Skelly, that I haven't had a hand in any game, if there has been one going on!" Lightning Jim exclaimed, earnestly, beginning to be alarmed. "I am as innocent as a child!"

"Oh, yes, of course!" the officer cried.

"Pon my word it is so!" the crook protested. "If anybody has got away with any swag I did not have any hand in it!"

The detectives looked at each other. This was not what was expected.

The crook noticed the look, but misunderstood its meaning.

"It is the honest truth, gentlemen, I am telling you!" he cried. "Come, now, you know I am a pretty old hand, and if I had been up to any little banky-panky games, I would be a fool to deny it when I am fairly caught, but it isn't so this time. If there has been any cracksmen at work, I know nothing about it."

"I didn't think you have been stealing anything," Detective Skelly remarked.

"Oh, didn't you?" and Lightning Jim appeared to be considerably relieved.

"Oh, no."

"What on earth then did you want to go and worry the life out of a man by telling him that he was caught dead to rights and all that kind of nonsense?" the crook exclaimed.

"Because we have got you in a box, but we don't want you for stealing," the detective replied, sternly.

"You don't? Well, in the name of all that is wonderful, what do you want me for?"

"Murder!" cried Detective Skelly, sternly.

"Eh, what?"

"Mrs. Escobedo has been poisoned by a dose of arsenic, introduced in her medicine, and we arrest you for the crime!"

Lightning Jim broke out into a loud laugh to the astonishment of all present.

"Oh, gammon!" he cried. "Why, Skelly, what is biting you?"

"You will know what is biting you when you stretch hemp for this murder!" the officer cried, angrily.

"Oh, come, now, you don't want to try any such lay as this, or you will get the grand laugh from all the gang!" the cracksmen exclaimed in contempt. "Don't you know better than to think I would be up to any such game? When did you ever hear of me going outside of my regular line? Now that the jig is up here, I will admit that though I have been on the honest lay for awhile, yet if the chance came in my way to elope with a tidy bit of swag, the odds are big that I should not be able to resist the temptation, but when you come to talk of murder—oh, no, not for Joe!"

"That is clear out of my line. Why, Skelly, you ought to know me better. I really blush for your ignorance! Don't you know that I am one of the kind that don't believe in putting my precious neck in danger? When and where did you ever hear of me using a weapon on anybody? Nary time! And then to think you should blunder into the idea that I would poison a woman!"

"What could I make out of such a job? Do you think I am an ass to put my life in danger for nothing?"

The man spoke in such a way that all within the room were convinced that, no matter what he was, or had been, he was telling the truth now, and the expression upon the faces of the detectives showed him that he had made his point.

"You have got sense enough to see that you made a bad break here, eh?" he exclaimed, jeeringly. "Well, Skelly, I wish I may die if I would have believed you could have made such a blunder!"

"The lady dies of poison, you come in, spot me, an old crook, and jump at once to the conclusion, without rhyme or reason, that I was the man who did the job. Oh, a greenhorn on the force wouldn't give himself away as badly as that."

"Say, I don't want any impudence out of you!" cried the detective, angrily.

"All right; go ahead and abuse me because I am talking sense to you. But, Skelly, this really has been a bad break for you. You say the poor lady was poisoned by arsenic being put into her medicine. Now, if you had taken the trouble to have looked into the thing before accusing me, you would have found out that I had no chance to get at the medicine, for I never go up-stairs, and if the trick was worked yesterday, I can, luckily, prove by people who were with me all day long, that I couldn't possibly have got at the stuff. But the idea is ridiculous! What good would it do me to poison a woman who never harmed me, and by whose death I could not gain anything?"

"Well, I will have to hold on to you for awhile anyway," said the detective, thus admitting he was satisfied a mistake had been made.

"Oh, that's all right, I'm not afraid of my record in this house!" the crook declared.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A SUSPICION.

"No, sir, not the least bit afraid of my record, and I am willing to stay here and face the consequences!" the crook continued in the most earnest manner. "I give you my word I will not try any fly-by-night game. I haven't done anything to make me afraid, and I will stay right here as long as you want me."

"I presume, Mr. Escobedo, that you will not care to keep me in your service, now that you know my record," he said, turning to that gentleman and addressing him in the most respectful manner.

"Well, sir, I suppose not; it would be rather awkward for me to keep you after this disclosure, although I must admit that I haven't any complaint to make in regard to you," the Fresh answered.

"It does me proud, sir, to have a gentleman like yourself do me justice," the old cracksmen remarked with a polite bow. "And now that the game is up I will admit that I have been on a prospecting tour here after valuables, and it may be interesting to you to know that the chances are big I would have got away with a tidy bit of swag—your wife's sparklers and the bonds in the safe up-stairs, was the boodle I had my eyes on—if you hadn't had the place so well guarded, and you had not been such a deuce of a shot with your revolver. I would have cracked the safe as soon as I discovered that it was worth cracking, but I was afraid the operation might disturb you, and I was not willing to risk being made a target of even to secure so big a swag. Money is a good thing, but it will not do a man much good if he has to croak to get it."

"That is an extremely sensible conclusion of yours, Jim, but you were always noted for being a long-headed fellow," Detective Skelly remarked.

"Thanks, many, for the compliment," responded the cracksmen with a bow.

"Well, now, Jim, if we let you run loose without putting the darbies on you, can we depend upon your staying here so as to be on hand if you are wanted?" the detective asked.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Skelly, I give you my word that I will not cut my lucky, so there is no use of you putting the bracelets on me," the other replied without hesitation. "I feel perfectly sure that I will not be wanted. As I told you, my record in this house is as straight as a string."

"All right, you are released on parole then, and, Jim, if you keep your eyes open, you may be able to discover something which will help us in our search, and it will not be any money out of your pocket either," the detective added.

"You may depend upon my doing anything I can to put you on the right track!" the man declared. "I would have done it anyway, even if you hadn't said anything about it. A gentleman in my line is always ready to do a good turn for a gentleman in yours, for it comes in mighty handy for a man sometimes to have a friend at court," the cracksmen observed. "I have just been thinking a bit over this affair, and I declare it bothers me, for I don't see any reason for anybody to wish to hurt a lady like Mrs. Escobedo, who was one of the nicest ladies that I ever met. I don't see how anybody can make any money out of it, and I feel sure that some of the servants had a hand in it, for if there had been any crook in the house besides myself I would have spotted 'im."

"Well, keep your eyes open, and report if you strike anything."

"Yes, sir, I will," and then, with a low bow, the cracksmen departed.

There was a vague suspicion in his mind despite his words, but he did not choose to impart it to the detectives at present.

There was another crook in the house besides himself, the woman Celeste Dufarge, and the thought had come to him that, possibly, she knew something about the matter.

"I don't exactly see what she could gain by working this trick," he mused as he proceeded along the hall to his sanctum. "And, most assuredly, the captain never gave orders for anything of the kind, for the gang couldn't make anything by her death. In fact, this bursts up our game altogether, for now we don't stand any chance to collar the swag and we have just been wasting our time."

"If she did the trick she was working for some outside party, and that don't appear possible. Who could make anything by the woman's death? and arsenic too, the worst thing that could be used, for it is so easily detected. It is a big mystery, anyhow!"

As he approached the door of his room, Celeste Dufarge made her appearance; she had evidently been loitering in the entry, waiting for him to come out.

"Is the game up?" she exclaimed, eagerly.

"Hush! not so loud, and don't talk here," he continued. "Come into the room."

She obeyed, and when the door was securely closed behind them she exclaimed:

"I have been on pins and needles! Those were detective officers, eh?"

"Did you recognize them?"

"No, I never saw either one of them before," she replied. "I have never been in any trouble up here, and I don't know a single one of the detectives, but I jumped to the conclusion that they were detectives from the peculiar way in which they spoke to you."

"You were right in your guess; the pair are two of the smartest 'fly cops' in the country, Detectives Skelly and O'Neal, and when either

one of them gets after a man he has got to hump himself pretty lively to keep out of their clutches."

"Well, you have nothing to fear," the woman observed. "Of course, you are sailing under false colors here, but they cannot do anything to you for that; all they can do is to warn you to get out, and you would have to go anyway for I don't suppose there is any chance now for us to get at the swag."

"Oh, they 'wanted' me; they thought I had a hand in the affair."

"Eh, what is that?" the woman exclaimed, evidently much astonished. "You don't mean to say that somebody has worked the safe and got away with the swag?"

"No, not that exactly," the cracksmen remarked, slowly. He had tried on the woman the same shrewd dodge by means of which the astute detective hoped to catch him, but it worked no better in her case than it had in his.

"Well, what do you mean? I don't understand—anything else gone and they thought you took it?"

"No, nothing is missing."

"Why were you wanted then?"

"They thought I had poisoned Mrs. Escobedo," responded the unknown, bluntly, hoping to take the woman off her guard.

"You don't mean to say that she was poisoned?" Celeste exclaimed, in a tone full of wonder.

"Yes, she died of a dose of arsenic which some one put into her cough mixture."

"Poor woman! what a shame to be cut off that way!" she exclaimed, in a tone which seemed to express genuine sorrow.

Lightning Jim was watching her closely, but she did not seem to be aware of the scrutiny.

"And I say it seems to me that you made an awful blunder when you went to work in such a stupid way, for the odds are a hundred to one that you will be caught!" he declared.

"Caught!" exclaimed Celeste, bewildered. "I caught! Why, what on earth do you mean? I haven't done a thing wrong since I have been in the house—I haven't taken a pin's worth. The captain's orders were for me to watch the lay of the land, not to try to get away with any swag."

"Oh, I don't mean that—I mean this poison business; you ought not to have used arsenic!"

"Are you crazy—do you think I killed the woman?" cried Celeste, indignantly, and as if his meaning had just flashed upon her.

"Well, didn't you do the job?"

"You must be out of your senses to imagine such a thing!" she declared. "Why should I want to kill her—what could I make by her death? Oh, you are only trying to scare me, but I am no fool!"

"Yes, I was only joking," the cracksmen responded, convinced that he had been on the wrong track, for the woman was advancing just the same arguments which he had used when accused of committing the crime.

"But, I say, who do you suppose did do the job?"

"No one of the house servants, that is sure, for they are all on the square!" the woman declared. "We are the only crooks in the place."

"Oh, this is an amateur job; no regular professional would blunder in that way; besides, as you say, what professional could gain anything by her death?"

"That is true, and if the arsenic was put into her cough medicine it must have been done during the evening when they were away at the opera, for I saw Annette, her maid, bring the medicine to her just before dinner, and the arsenic could not have been in it then or else it would have affected her long before it did, for I have always heard it said that arsenic acted very quickly."

"Yes, that is so; I guess she took a dose just before going to bed."

"Very likely, and I don't see how any one could have put the arsenic in it, for Annette was in the room from the time Mrs. Escobedo went away until she returned, and I have an idea she had the medicine in her pocket all the time, for when she was at supper I saw the bottle sticking out and the housekeeper told her to be careful and not drop it out for it would be sure to break."

"Annette is all right, eh?"

"Oh, yes, she is as honest and simple-hearted as a child! Now, if I was going to suspect anybody, do you know who I would fix on?"

"No, I don't see any grounds to suspect anybody."

"Oh, I haven't anything to go on; it is only idle suspicion. I should suspect Miss Melville!"

"And why?"

"Because I think she is in love with Mr. Escobedo; at any rate she acts that way, and she might have poisoned the wife, thinking she would get the husband in time."

"Well, it is not impossible; such things have been done, but I think it is very improbable. Anyhow, though, I will keep my eyes on her."

"And so shall I; she had access to the room and might have got at the medicine."

"It would be some big money for us if we could discover the party."

"We can try!" Celeste declared.

CHAPTER XXXIV.
ON THE SCENT.

"We were barking up the wrong tree as far as Lightning Jim was concerned," Detective Skelly remarked after the old crook had departed.

"Yes, it is pretty evident that he did not have anything to do with it," O'Neal concluded.

"The fellow showed that conclusively," Escobedo observed. "As far as my experience with men of his character goes they never commit a crime without there is a good reason for them to do it; and I cannot see that there was any reason for any one to wish to do my poor girl harm, for no one would profit by her death."

"There is a reason for the crime, of course, for such deeds are never committed without reasons, but we have not been sharp enough, so far, to find out what it is," Detective Skelly answered.

"I most certainly agree with this gentleman," the old doctor said. "Such a horrible crime as this one was never committed without some good, strong motive."

"Now, with your permission, I should like to examine the room where the tragedy occurred," Detective Skelly said.

"Certainly!" the Fresh replied.

"But first, one thing I would like to look into!" exclaimed the detective as a sudden idea came to him. "Your wife took a dose of the medicine just before dinner, I understand?"

"Yes."

"Without its producing any evil effect."

"None at all!"

"That was at what time?"

"About five o'clock."

"And whereabouts was this bottle of medicine from that time until your wife took the fatal dose?"

"Let me see," said the Fresh, reflectively, endeavoring to remember all the particulars. "Just as we were summoned to dinner my wife remembered that she ought to take her medicine and dispatched her maid, Annette, for it. It was brought, the dose taken, and the bottle returned to the girl; then the next time I saw it was when my wife asked me to hand it to her just as we were going to bed, and it was then on the bureau in our bedroom."

"We must have a talk with this Annette, and see where the bottle was when you were away," Detective Skelly said.

The girl was summoned, and soon made her appearance.

Annette Perkins was a girl of eighteen or thereabout, a medium-sized, moon-faced, innocent-looking creature.

The word, maid-servant, was written all over her.

The daughter of an English butler and a French waiting-maid, she had been brought up to servitude, and, like the class in England from which she came, never expected to do anything but wait on somebody else.

She came without the least apprehension, for she had no suspicion that the two strange gentlemen were detectives, a fact which would have filled her dull soul with dread if she had been acquainted with it.

Her eyes were red with weeping, and she sobbed a little as she entered the room and made a courtesy to the gentlemen.

"Don't cry, my girl," said Escobedo, kindly. "These gentlemen are anxious to learn the particulars in regard to the death of your mistress, and you must answer their questions to the best of your ability."

"Yes, sir, indeed I will, and with pleasure," she said, with another courtesy. "Poor, dear Mrs. Escobedo! never did a girl in this world have a better mistress," and then she began to sob again.

"Don't cry, my dear," said Detective Skelly, in a fatherly way.

"No, sir, I will not, but it is awful hard not to, when I think how good she was."

"You brought the bottle of medicine to her just before dinner-time, I believe?" the detective inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"And after she took the medicine did she give the bottle back to you?"

"Yes, sir, and I put it in my apron pocket. I remember that distinctly, sir, the housekeeper called my attention to it, and told me to be careful not to break it."

"After you had your dinner, what did you do with the bottle?"

"Oh, I didn't do anything with it; it staid right in my pocket. My pocket is a deep one, as you can see for yourself, sir, and I was not at all afraid of the bottle falling out."

"Ah, yes, I see; and what did you do from dinner-time until your mistress came home?"

"I was in the housekeeper's room talking with her and the rest of the girls, until about nine o'clock, and then I went up-stairs and tidied the room up—put away Mrs. Escobedo's things, you know."

"Yes, yes, of course; while you were down-stairs who did you show the bottle of medicine to?" asked the detective, in his careless way.

"Why to no one, sir!" exclaimed the girl, in

surprise. "No one wanted to look at it—it was only a common little bottle of medicine; there wasn't anything to see."

"Then the bottle was not out of your pocket until you went up-stairs?"

"No, sir, it was not, and I didn't take it out until about ten o'clock, after I got everything put away and had set down to my knitting, so as to pass the time away until my mistress returned; then, after I got to work, I happened to think of the bottle, and got up and put it on the bureau, just where you found it, sir," she said, addressing the Fresh, "when Mrs. Escobedo asked you to hand it to her just as I was about to go."

"Ah, you saw Mr. Escobedo take the bottle from the bureau?"

"Yes, sir, just as I went away."

"Did anybody come in the room while you sat there knitting?"

"No, sir, not a soul."

"How long do you suppose you were asleep," asked Skelly, quietly.

The girl looked surprised.

"I—I don't think I went to sleep at all, sir."

"Oh, didn't I understand you to say that you had two or three naps while you were waiting for Mrs. Escobedo's return?"

"No, sir, I don't think I went to sleep at all. I did get kind of nodding-like at one time—it was about twelve o'clock, but when I looked at the clock and saw how late it was I determined to keep awake, for I knew Mr. Escobedo wouldn't like it to come home and find me asleep."

"Ah, yes, I see. You are a good girl, Annette. That is all. Do not say anything to the rest of the servants, for there is no use making any talk about the matter."

"Yes, sir," and with a low salutation the waiting-maid departed.

"I begin to see how the job was worked," Detective Skelly remarked. "This girl *did* fall asleep, although she denies it, and honestly believes she did not. When she nodded, as she calls it, she was sound asleep, and as it was twelve o'clock when she awoke the chances are that she slept for a good hour, and while she slept, some one entered the room and doctored the medicine. It was a lucky thing for you, Mr. Escobedo, that the girl staid in the room until she saw you take up the medicine; that lets you out, for you couldn't have added the arsenic unless you did it right before your wife's eyes."

"Yes, in a case of this kind the more proof that a man can get that he could not have committed the crime the better," the Fresh replied.

"That is about the size of it. And now, Mr. Escobedo, I think we had better examine the scene of the tragedy and see if we cannot find something that will aid us in our search," Detective Skelly remarked.

Then the party proceeded up-stairs.

Mr. and Mrs. Escobedo occupied two large adjoining bed-rooms, separated only by a closet-like apartment, the lavatory.

This was in accordance with the fashionable notion that husband and wife should have separate bedrooms, but as both the Fresh and Margaret had not been "born to the purple," this custom did not meet with their approval, and though they were supposed to occupy the two rooms, and the Fresh did all his smoking and writing in the rear apartment, yet one bed answered for them both at night, after the good old-fashioned way.

The detectives examined the apartments with critical eyes.

The body of the hapless Margaret had been transferred to the parlor, for the undertaker and his assistants had been summoned, and arrived with the morning light.

The girl sat in this front room I suppose?" Detective Skelly observed.

"Yes, in the rocking-chair, by the gas, just where it is now," Escobedo replied.

"And the doors between the two rooms were open?"

"Yes, they are usually open, and they certainly were last night when we came in."

"It is a well-built house," the detective observed. "The doors move without noise."

"Yes."

"It would be a very easy matter for any one to steal into the rear room—Was the gas lighted in there by the way?"

"No."

"Easy as rolling off a log then for any one to get into that room without the girl knowing it—she being busy here with her knitting, probably nodding half the time—watch for an opportunity when the maid was sound asleep, steal into this room and doctor the medicine."

"Very easy!" Doctor Parker exclaimed.

"The trick was done that way!" O'Neal said, in a tone of conviction.

"Yes, it looks like it," Escobedo coincided.

"Is this your wife's writing-desk here?" Detective Skelly asked, going to a fanciful little desk which stood in a corner of the room.

"Yes."

"Was she in the habit of keeping any private papers of importance in it?" Skelly continued, perceiving that the keys were in the locks.

"Not to my knowledge."

Skelly peered into the desk, more out of curiosity than from expectation of discovering anything.

A folded paper attracted his attention. He took it out, opened, and read it, and as he did so a peculiar light shone in his keen, gray eyes although the expression of his face never changed.

"This is rather queer," he remarked, in the careless way he usually assumed when he was in quest of anything important.

CHAPTER XXXV.

STRONG EVIDENCE.

THE words excited the curiosity of the others, and they watched the detective as he folded the paper so that only the bottom part of it was visible, and upon that was written a name.

"This is your wife's signature, I presume, Mr. Escobedo?" he said, holding the paper so that the Fresh could examine it.

"Margaret Escobedo," the Fresh read the written name. "Yes, that is—Hold on, though!" he exclaimed, abruptly, examining the paper more closely.

"That is her name, Margaret Escobedo, sure enough, but that is not her signature, although it is a pretty good imitation."

"That is odd!" was Detective Skelly's comment. "What makes you think that she did not write it? Women, you know, are not like men, and their signatures sometimes vary greatly."

"Well, that *may* be true," Escobedo observed. "I don't know that it is, or isn't, for I have no experience in that line, but I am sure this is not my wife's signature, for she could not write as *well* as this is written. A party may often write worse than usual, particularly in a signature, but they seldom write better. My wife wrote a very plain hand, not a bad one, but plain, and entirely devoid of flourishes, and this imitation, although it is a good one, and might deceive a stranger, not so familiar with her hand as I am, is a far better specimen of handwriting than she could produce."

"See! here is her real signature—a note she sent me in the city the other day."

The Fresh drew a letter from his pocket, and opened it so the others could compare the two.

It was as he had said, and all saw it at a glance.

"Yes, you are right, it is a forgery, and a pretty good one. Have you any idea what sort of a document this forged signature is attached to?" Detective Skelly asked.

"Not the slightest, for I never saw the paper before," the Fresh answered, while the rest looked on with intense interest.

"Maybe if you knew the contents of the paper you wouldn't be so quick in declaring the signature to be a forgery!" the detective remarked.

"I don't care what the contents are, Mr. Skelly, my wife never wrote that name."

"It is an order on the Safe Deposit Company to turn over to you all of your wife's property which is in their hands!" the detective announced, unfolding the paper so the others could read what was written above the signature.

This disclosure astonished all.

The Fresh shook his head.

"It is a forgery, all the same!" he declared. "And if you compare my wife's writing in this note with the body of the order, you can see there is a wide difference. The signature is a good imitation, but the rest is not."

This was quite apparent.

"But I say, I don't understand this," Escobedo remarked.

Both the detectives laughed, and Skelly exclaimed:

"My dear Mr. Escobedo, if you had been hunting rascals as long as we have, this thing wouldn't bother you! The party who poisoned your wife left this in the desk: it is a trap to catch you—to fix the crime upon you! The idea was that you would discover the paper and, without troubling yourself to decide whether it was genuine or not, seize upon the chance to secure the bonds placed with the Safe Deposit Company."

"That action would prove to the world that you *had* a motive to commit the murder, and it would go far to fix the hangman's noose around your neck!"

"I will own right up, Mr. Escobedo, that I was staggered when I discovered the paper, and, for the moment, I believed that you were the man who did the job, and that was the reason I tried you with the signature. If you had known the contents of the paper, and had placed it there so it could be found, you would have declared the signature a genuine one; but I see now I wronged you, and I am glad of it!"

"Gentlemen, in a case of this kind, a man's words go for little," the Fresh said, slowly, and with great feeling. "The bigger the rascal the more he protests. All I can say is that I am innocent."

"I believe you, Mr. Escobedo," cried the usually cold detective, and he impulsively extended his hand.

"So do I!" exclaimed O'Neal.

"And I!" added the doctor, and two more hands were outstretched.

The Fresh clasped them warmly.

"Gentlemen, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

"This trick is a piece of the best work I ever struck, and I have been onto some big games in my time," Skelly declared. "The murderer was determined to get you into a hole, and if any ordinary policemen had been put on this case, the bracelets would have been on your wrists before now."

"Yes, but we are old birds, and up to a trick or two," O'Neal declared.

"I am going to search this apartment," cried Skelly, abruptly, "and I would be willing to lay a hundred to ten that we discover more evidence which will seem to implicate you before we get through. Oh, I tell you! the party went in to snare you for the hangman."

The search began.

In the front room nothing was found, but in the rear apartment, Escobedo's bedroom, tucked away in a crevice in the closet, where the plaster had been broken away, was a small, folded paper, which bore the card of a Third avenue druggist, and the red skull and cross-bones which denoted that poison was within; but, in order to make assurance doubly sure, upon the label, in a peculiar sort of a back-hand, was written the word, "Arsenic."

"There! what did I tell you?" exclaimed Skelly, full of excitement, as he displayed the article, which it had been his luck to pounce upon, to the rest.

And opening the paper, the discovery was made that a few grains of arsenic still remained within.

"Mr. Escobedo, you may thank your lucky stars that we are on this case, for if a blunderhead had hold of it, this evidence would hang you, sure!"

"Well, gentlemen, it is a consolation for me to know that you don't think I am guilty," the Fresh remarked.

"It is because we are up to a trick or two," O'Neal declared.

"Yes, and we will trap the man who put up this job, clever as he is," Skelly cried. "But, I say, Mr. Escobedo, haven't you any idea who the party is? Can't you put your mind on an enemy who would like to strike at your very life?"

"No, I cannot, excepting that this blow may come from the same hand that killed my horse on the Sheepshead Bay track."

"You are right there, for a thousand dollars," the detective cried. "That job was worked in the same peculiar way—no trace, no clew to the party who did the deed."

"But I say, Skelly, isn't there a flaw in the proceedings," the other detective asked. "This Third avenue druggist, whose name is on the label; he will be able to tell to whom he sold the poison, and it doesn't seem within the bounds of possibility that it could have been bought by a party resembling Mr. Escobedo here so closely that the druggist would identify him as the man to whom he sold the poison."

"That is so; that does look as if the worker of the game had overreached himself; sometimes the most cunning rascal will make a mistake of this kind so that he can be tripped up," Skelly remarked.

"It looks like it now."

During this conversation the Fresh had been studying the writing upon the label closely.

"I say, gentlemen, it may be a freak of my imagination, but it seems to me as if the handwriting upon this label is similar to that upon the forged order. This is a back-hand and evidently disguised, but I fancy I can trace a resemblance," the Fresh remarked.

Upon examination the rest agreed to this.

"This mixes the case up still more," Skelly observed, "for this label ought to have been filled in by the druggist who sold the arsenic, and this should be his handwriting. But I will get at the bottom of that inside of a few hours, for when I get after the druggist—he is a German to judge by his name—I will soon have the truth out of him! This is a deep-laid scheme to either hang you, Mr. Escobedo, or to send you to Sing Sing for a long term of years, according to whether your jury is more or less stupid, but by the Lord, it will not work, as sure as my name is Skelly!"

"I say, as it is evident that this trick has been worked by some one in this house, don't you think we ought to make an examination of every one in it and take their pedigree?" O'Neal asked.

"Gentlemen, is it not possible that that Lightning Jim, as you call him, may be at the bottom of this?" Doctor Parker asked.

"Oh, no!" Detective Skelly exclaimed, decidedly. "I don't believe that money would hire him to engage in an affair of this sort. It is out of his line entirely. No crook had a hand in this matter; it is an amateur job, and the motive is revenge, not robbery."

"Go back over your past life, Mr. Escobedo. Can't you recall some foe, both cunning and cruel, who has cause to hate you enough to put up such a job as this?" Skelly continued.

"Yes, there is one party—and that one a woman!" the Fresh answered, after reflecting for a moment.

"You have hit it!" cried Skelly, emphatically. "This is more like a woman's work than a man's!"

"But I am not sure that the party is alive," the Fresh added. "It was my belief that she was dead, but now that these deadly blows are being aimed at me, I begin to believe she must have escaped the watery grave which all thought had received her."

"Some women are like cats and have nine lives," O'Neal observed.

"Yes, and the worse they are, the tighter they contrive to hold on to existence," Skelly added.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A STARTLING SURPRISE.

AND then Jack proceeded to relate the story of Margaret Escobedo's adventures in the West, which the reader who has perused the tales entitled, "The Fresh on the Rio Grande," and "The Fresh in Texas," is already familiar with; to those who have not read these novels a few words of explanation are due.

Margaret came to the banks of the Rio Grande to take possession of the vast estates left by her father, a famous cattle king, and there she was received by her cousins, Manuel and Isabel Escobedo, brother and sister.

The two maneuvered to bring about a match between the heiress and Manuel, who was a wild blade, and the leader of a band of masked outlaws known as the Red Riders of Rayon.

Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, whose wandering footsteps led him to the banks of the Rio Grande, became mixed up in the matter, having in his "fresh" way interfered in behalf of the girl.

In time he destroyed the outlaw band with a force he raised, and Manuel and Isabel, exposed in their true colors, were forced to seek safety in flight.

After a year or so they returned in disguise expressly to be revenged upon the Fresh.

His fortunate star was in the ascendant as usual, and in a bloody fight he triumphed over his enemies.

Manuel was killed in the struggle and Isabel who fought by her brother's side in male attire, almost as much of a man as he, was supposed to have been drowned in attempting to escape across the Rio Grande.

"She *did* escape!" cried Detective Skelly when the recital was finished. "You can bet your life on it! and this is her work; but I will have her before she is a month older, or I am not the man I think I am!"

"She must have worked this job through some one of the servants, and the quicker we get at an examination the better," O'Neal suggested.

The rest agreed to this, but as they turned to leave the apartment they were startled by the sound of a dull, heavy explosion.

"What the deuce does that mean?" cried Skelly, rushing into the entry.

A chorus of screams and yells from the servants below ascended on the air.

"By heaven! the house is on fire!" O'Neal exclaimed.

It was true.

The west wing was in flames, and it was there that the explosion had taken place.

All was confusion, but as the water supply was good and there was plenty of assistance at hand—the report of the tragic death of Mrs. Escobedo had widely spread and the villagers had come to gape at the scene of the tragedy—the flames were overcome in time.

An examination disclosed that the explosion was evidently, due to gas leaking from the pipes, and some one had carelessly thrown a match down a cellar grating which had set fire to some rubbish there and so the flame got to the gas.

Skelly shook his head; it looked to him more like design than accident.

But the motive?

Strict orders had been given that no one should leave the grounds, but when the fire came, of course, everybody went just where they pleased.

"When you get your servants together and come to count noses, you will find that one, or two, maybe, will be missing," Skelly predicted.

Some of the women had gone fairly wild with fright, and had fled from the place as though they expected the very ground would open and swallow them up, and it was not until late in the afternoon before they returned, and then, as the detective predicted, Celeste Dufarge was missing.

Fighting Jim was questioned, but he professed utter ignorance in regard to the girl. He knew nothing about her, except she had applied for a vacant situation, and he had engaged her, as he had engaged others in the same way.

"She is the party we want all the same, though," the detective remarked in his quiet way. "I have my doubts, too, about Jim's statement, although I have no idea that he knew what game she was up to, for he would not have had anything to do with her if he had; I will take measures to put a twist on him, which will be apt to force the truth out."

"And now, Mr. Escobedo, under the circumstances, you had better let us arrest you, just as

if we had—that this evidence was conclusive in regard to your guilt; that will throw the real criminal off the track; and believing that you are safely in for it, some false move may be made which will lead us to our game."

"We will wait, of course, until the funeral is over, and then we will 'go for you' as if we believed we had caught you red-handed."

"Yes, all right. It doesn't make any difference to me as to what I am accused of now," he replied. "After this matter is ended, and the real criminal is caught, I want to get back to the West as soon as possible. I am a son of the wilderness, and the quicker I get back to my stamping-grounds the better!"

"O'Neal will remain with you here, just as if he was keeping an eye on you, you know, and I will go for that druggist; and maybe I can make a point out of him."

And so the affair was arranged.

An hour later, Detective Skelly was on his way to the metropolis; and as soon as he arrived in the city he proceeded straight to the drug store on Third avenue.

It was a small concern, kept by a German, as the detective had anticipated.

He was a pleasant-looking little fat man, and the moment the detective showed him the label, said he was a detective officer, and had come to get some information in regard to the selling of the poison, the druggist became much agitated.

"Oh, mine Gott in Himmel! it has come at last!" he exclaimed. He spoke with only a slight accent, like a German who had been many years in this country.

"My dear sir, I have much worried about dot t'ing!" he continued. "But it was not mine fault, I assure you."

"I should like to find out all I can about the sale of this paper of arsenic."

"Yes, yes, it was that accursed clerk!" the druggist cried.

"Ah, then you did not make the sale?"

"Mine gootness, no!" the druggist fairly shouted. "Do you think I sells poison to every mans dot asks for it?"

"Give me the particulars."

"It was the clerk."

"Where is he?"

"Gone to der devil, I hope!" cried the other in a rage.

"Who was the clerk?"

"I know not. He was a youth—a Frenchman, he said, but he speak goot English. He was willing to work for his board and sleep in der store to learn der business!" and then the druggist described the appearance of the young man.

"Yes, I see, and you took him in."

"Mine gootness, yes! und then he took me in. It was the first day he was here; some friends come and want me to have a glass of beer next door. I go, und tell Henri—so he called himself Henri Villefort—if a customer comes you calls me! He say, 'Yes.' I go; in ten minutes I am back. He say, 'There was one man, und I thought I could attend to him, as all he wanted was an ounce of arsenic!'"

"My goot sir, with a feather you might have knocked me down!"

"Und you sold it to him?" I cried. "Yes," he say, "I put it up in one of the poison labels and wrote arsenic on it. I didn't know vot it was worth, und charged him a tollar."

"Mine goot sir, I was wild! 'Vot is der man like?' I cried, und he described him," and here the druggist gave an exact description of Jack Escobedo.

"I rush out into der street, but dat mans I can find nowhere. I come me back to der store, und I say to dot fool, 'You go mit der devil und shake yourself!' und I see him no more!"

"Oh, it is all right," said Skelly. "I only wanted to find out how you came to sell the poison. Don't worry yourself," and he sauntered out of the store.

"Of all the plants I ever struck, this is the worst—the deepest game I ever saw!" the detective exclaimed, as he walked slowly down the street.

"Why, this man's evidence, delivered before an ordinary jury, would be sure to put the rope around Escobedo's neck."

"Is the young Frenchman the tool or the principal? I have his description, so that is something to go upon, although the fellow may have been disguised so completely, that if I attempt to track him by it, I may be only wasting my time."

"The girl, too, Celeste Dufarge, is also French; the two are working together beyond a doubt."

"Hold on a bit!" the detective exclaimed, as an idea came to him. "Isn't it probable that the two are one? That the youth was the girl in disguise?"

"That idea will do to work upon," was the conclusion to which he came, after revolving the matter in his mind for a while.

"I know that there isn't more than one woman out of a thousand who can play a game of that kind successfully, but this party may be that one. Women have been known to masquerade for years as men and deceive everybody."

"Let me see how best can I get on the track of my game? I have two descriptions, one of Henri Villefort, dark hair, and Celeste Dufarge, light curls.

"I will put the police on the track of both. If it was a genuine game, the French quarter would be the place to look; if it is this Isabel Escobedo, as I suspect, then where the Spaniards congregate will be a more likely place to find the prey.

"Anyhow I will be sure that there will not be a resort for strangers in the city from the Fifth Avenue Hotel to the lowest den in Water street that I will not have examined."

And the detective was as good as his word. Never was there a more exhaustive search and the result was—Nothing!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE CRACKSMAN TALKS.

THE remains of the unfortunate Margaret Escobedo were committed to the cold embraces of the grave, and then on the next day after the funeral, all the city was astounded at the news that Jack Escobedo had been arrested, charged with poisoning his wife.

The Fresh was again committed to the Tombs, and the world at large believed he surely would be hung.

Have and Humpit were retained by him as his counsel, and there were plenty to cry out that Lawyer Have would not win a victory this time.

An examination had been made of the remains, and the doctors declared she had been poisoned by arsenic, so there was no doubt in regard to this important point.

The district attorney, while giving out to the public his opinion that the case seemed to be a good one against the prisoner, was really in the secret, and was using all the forces at his command to apprehend the real criminal.

Never in the history of the metropolis were there more strenuous endeavors put forth to arrest a "wanted" party.

But it was all in vain.

If the French youth, Villefort, or the girl, Celeste Dufarge, were in the city they were so securely hidden that the detectives, aided by the entire police force, could not find them.

The probabilities that an escape by flight had been resorted to, were discussed, but the police superintendent was of the opinion that the principal was still in the city.

As Detective Skelly had declared, pressure was brought to bear upon Lightning Jim, and at last he made his appearance at Headquarters, and in a very sulky way inquired for Detective Skelly.

As that gentleman chanced to be in, the cracksmen was speedily ushered into his presence.

"I say, Mr. Skelly, I think this is rather rough on me, and I have come to ask you to let up!" he exclaimed.

"What is the matter, Jim?" Skelly asked as if surprised.

"Oh, you know what the matter is well enough!" the other retorted. "I want you to call your dogs off!"

"Are they bothering you?"

"I don't want to be followed night and day!" the cracksmen protested. "Particularly when I am not wanted for anything."

"I guess you can put a stop to it if you want to, Jim."

"How?"

"By opening your mouth and telling me what you know about this Escobedo affair."

"Why you have got the man dead to rights!"

"Exactly, but there are others in the game that I want. I am not going to beat about the bush with you, Jim; there was another party in that house who was on the 'cross' besides yourself. You know who I mean, well enough, the girl whom you engaged as your assistant, and who disappeared after the fire, Celeste Dufarge."

"I wish I may die, Skelly, if I know where she is!" the crook cried.

"That isn't the point! I am not asking you to tell me what you don't know, but what you do. Come, come; out with it now; it is a great deal better to be on good terms with me than otherwise."

"Oh, of course I know that. I will say for you, Skelly, that you are the fairest one of the detective crowd."

"Tell me then what I want to know, and I may be able to do you a good turn some time."

"Well, I wouldn't have hesitated, only other parties were mixed up in it."

"Exactly, I understand; you had to consult the rest of the gang."

"Oh, no, no gang, only a pal or two who work with me once in a while."

"We will not quibble about a name, gang or pals it is all one to me; go ahead!"

"A little while ago a couple of gentlemen picked up a party they thought would be good for a stake."

"Yes, I see."

"Well, Mr. Skelly, it was a post of the worst kind—a regular plant, and no mistake!"

"They did not make their stake then?"

"Not a once! The man had laid himself out and showed his leather—his roll, you know, so as to induce some crooks to go for him."

"Well, that was rather odd."

"You bet it was! It took these friends of mine so much by surprise that you could have knocked them down with a straw, and now, what do you suppose the man wanted?"

"To make the acquaintance of a couple of crooks," answered the detective, promptly.

"You bit the bull's-eye the first time!" the other declared. "That was just the game he was playing. And now, why do you suppose he wanted to see some crooks?"

"To get them to go into some game he was going to play."

"Right again! I have always said, detective, that you were the smartest man on the force!"

"Much obliged for the compliment. Well, I suppose these friends of yours told the party they were willing to go in with him."

"Oh, bless you! they were small fry and not the kind of men he wanted; nothing but the cocks of the walks would do him."

"Like yourself, for instance."

Lightning Jim grinned and ducked his head to show he appreciated the estimation in which he was held.

"He talked business in such a straightforward way that these parties took stock in what he said, and so they went to some pals of mine and told what was wanted."

"And he was put into communication with the gang?"

"Hardly a gang; only a little party of pals that some times pull together," replied the cracksmen, modestly.

"Yes, I see."

"After he was introduced, he come right to business, said he was on a first-class lay but the job was too big for him to work and he needed assistance."

"And that was where your pals come in?"

"Yes, they said that they were willing to go in, and then he said the man to be struck was this Jack Escobedo, whose wife had valuable diamonds and silver, and who was in the habit of having ten to twenty thousand dollars' worth of Government bonds lying around loose. As it happened, my pals had already had their eyes on Mr. Escobedo, thinking a good stake might be got out of his place, so they were willing to go in, particularly as the stranger said he would advance all expenses until a strike was made, and, as an earnest that he was the kind of man to work a big job, he claimed to be the fellow that shot Mr. Escobedo's horse on the Sheepshead Bay track."

"Aha, Jim! now you are getting interesting!"

"The first point he said was to get a man into the house."

"And you volunteered for that, I suppose?"

"I was the best man, you know, for in my younger days I was in service in England, that was before I got into trouble, and I could fill the bill to a hair!"

"As it happened, Escobedo wanted a butler just then, and I got the place, but after I got used to the lay of the land, I was obliged to report that it was not going to be an easy job, for though the swag was there, it was well guarded. This did not seem to disturb our party at all, for he said he would find a way to work the trick, but my pals must get a woman into the house. They said they did not know of any that could be trusted just then, and he replied that he would send one."

"And this Celeste Dufarge was his stool-pigeon?"

"You have got a head on your shoulders, detective!"

"Never mind that! She was the woman, eh?"

"Yes, I was instructed to take her when she came, having previously made it all right with the family, and I did so."

"What did you find out about this Celeste?"

"Mighty little! She was from New Orleans; said she had been in trouble and forced to come North, but I could see she wasn't a regular professional, although as smart as a steel-trap, and it was my notion she was disguised, although her make-up was so good that even I couldn't see for sure just exactly what was false about her."

"What did she do while she was in the house?"

"Nothing, except to keep her eyes open, just as I did. At this time, mind you, I thought she was sent by my pals, and did not find out until afterwards that the stranger furnished her, and that my pals knew no more about her than I did."

"Yes, yes, I see; what else?"

"That is all; when the trouble came, that burst up the game, of course. She got scared, I think, when she found out that you and O'Neal were detectives, and cut her lucky as quickly as she could."

"Have you any idea where I could put my hands on her?"

"So help me Bob, detective, I know no more about it than you do!" the crook declared.

"Honest, now?" Skelly cried, fixing a piercing gaze on the face of the cracksmen.

"Oh, yes, honest! wish I may die if I do! I

haven't seen her since she lit out from the house up the river."

"Do your pals know anything about her?"

"Oh, no, none of them even saw her. Why, Mr. Skelly, if they knew, I could get the information for you easily enough."

"Give me a description of her. I saw the woman, of course, when O'Neal and I examined the servants after the tragedy occurred, but as there wasn't anything suspicious about her looks, I did not take particular notice of her, and then, when I discovered you, I fancied I had got the party, and that made me careless—that is where I blundered and gave a point away."

"Oh, well, we cannot keno every time, you know."

Then the cracksmen gave a full description of Celeste Dufarge, which the detective carefully compared with the one which had been already drawn out.

"No new points," he remarked. "I am afraid we have lost valuable time. I say, Jim, you made a big blunder in not coming to me before."

"Oh, well, Mr. Skelly, it isn't exactly the square thing for a man to give his pals away," the cracksmen protested. "I have always been held up as the man who never squealed, no matter how tightly the screws were put on, and, in this case, I would not have come down, for all you were hounding me so closely, if my pals hadn't advised me to do it. 'It can't hurt us,' they said, 'and as for these strangers let them look out for themselves.'"

"Good advice! but you ought to have tumbled to it before. Now, give me a description of the man."

"He called himself Auguste Robeline, and he was a Creole from the South. Here is the description carefully written out," and the crook handed a paper to the detective.

Skelly examined it eagerly. It corresponded pretty closely to the description which the German druggist had given of the young man who called himself Henri Villefort.

"Jim, you are an old bird and not easily fooled; do you suppose that if this Celeste Dufarge and Auguste Robeline were one party you would not have discovered it?"

"Well, you must remember, detective, that I never saw the man."

"Ah, is that so?"

"You bet!"

"And I suppose your pals never saw the woman?"

"You are right there."

"By Heaven! this scheme has been worked with most infernal skill!" the detective cried, annoyed at being thus baffled at every point.

"The game has been well played—all of my pals admit that," the cracksmen observed.

"This party has shook us completely, and though we have done a little detective business on our own hook, thinking we might make a stake if we could get hold of the party, we can't get on his track at all. But I say, Skelly, it is my belief that you are on the wrong track, if you are going to work on the idea that the girl and the man are one person. I know that Celeste was a woman, there's no mistake about that, and I don't believe any woman could fool my yards by pretending to be a man."

"There are instances on record, you know, where women have passed as men for years without their sex being suspected. There were three or four cases right in our own war. Women served as soldiers, herded right in with the men, and it was never suspected that they were anything but what they claimed to be until some accident, such as being wounded and sent to the hospital, disclosed that they were women," the detective said.

"Well, I have read of such things, but I must see one of these man-women before I believe it!" Lightning Jim declared.

"Your information is not particularly valuable, except to strengthen the evidence which I already possess."

"I say, Mr. Skelly, do you think this Celeste had anything to do with the poison business?" the cracksmen asked.

"Well, although the evidence is strong against Escobedo, yet it does not show that he doctored the medicine with his own hand, and I had an idea that she acted as his tool—that, while Escobedo and his wife were absent at the opera, she stole up-stairs, and watched her opportunity while the waiting-maid dozed, to put the arsenic in the cough-mixture."

The crook pondered over the matter for a few minutes.

"Well, she could have done it easily enough, for she was a sly baggage and as sharp as they make 'em," he remarked. "But if she was working for Escobedo, why did the Creole want to bother with my pals and get me into the house? You see, detective, it is pretty hard work to make the thing fit."

"True, the case is full of mysteries."

"Another bit of information I have, which may be of use to you," the crook observed. "This Robeline boasted that he was the man who shot Escobedo's horse; he also told, what we all thought was a cock-and-bull story, about how an agent of his—a female, we understood—

had gone to this Miss Habersham, daughter of the president of the Beaver National Bank, you know, and induced her to make Escobedo an offer to square his row with the bank for eighty thousand dollars. If Escobedo had accepted, he, the Creole—would have had the matter arranged so the money would be paid at night and we were to carry off the stake."

"A pretty big scheme!"

"Yes, it didn't work, because Escobedo would not pay the money, so the Creole said, but I never believed the yarn, though my pals thought there was something in it."

"Blowing, I guess," said Skelly, carelessly, as if he attached no importance to the story.

"Well, is that all?"

"Yes, all I know."

"Upon your word of honor?"

"Wish I may die if it ain't!"

All right, much obliged! I will do as much for you some time."

The crook departed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

DETECTIVE SKELLY lost no time in going to see Escobedo in the Tombs.

On the way he stopped into the office of Have and Humpit and got Lawyer Have to come with him.

Behold the two then shut up with Jack Escobedo in his cell.

The detective related all the particulars of his interview with the crook and the others listened attentively.

When it was finished, Escobedo and Skelly looked questioningly at the lawyer.

"Do you want my opinion, gentlemen?"

The others nodded.

"Well, I think there has been only one person in all this business, the Creole gentleman, the French girl, Celeste; the druggist's clerk, Henri, the woman who waited on Miss Habersham—if one did seek her, and I do not doubt it, for the rest of the story about Miss Habersham coming to see our friend here is true—were all one, and that one this woman-man, whom Jack here thought had found a grave in the waters of the Rio Grande, Isabel Escobedo."

The others assented to this conclusion.

"But the trouble, my dear boys, is to prove it!" the lawyer declared. "The snare in which our friend here is entangled has been woven with such devilish skill that, although we will be able to get him out all right, yet I doubt if we will succeed in getting at the true criminal. Unless I am greatly in error, the party by this time is well on her way to Mexico."

"But every avenue has been guarded!" the detective cried.

"What was there to prevent her taking passage on one of these coasting crafts bound for Mexican waters?" the lawyer asked. "I have been looking into the thing, and have discovered that a couple of vessels, bound for Mexican ports, sailed on the day after the murder was committed."

"By Jove! you are right; it could have been worked that way!" the detective exclaimed.

"But even if we knew where the woman was, we have hardly proof enough to warrant our going for her."

"Get me out of this scrape, Lawyer Have, and I will see that vengeance reaches her if she is on the earth!" the Fresh exclaimed.

"That is it exactly! that is the way the thing has got to be worked!"

A month went by.

The scions of the Escobedo line, or their lawyers descended upon New York like a flock of vultures.

Three millions of dollars was a prize worth fighting for, and when the Mexican first appeared they fondly hoped they could even take away from the husband his life interest, but the Fresh had taken the precaution to assign his rights to Lawyer Have, ostensibly to raise money to defend himself in the coming trial, so, even if he was shut in the Tombs, his interests were carefully guarded.

To the prison, to see the Fresh, came one of the Escobedo heirs, the only one who came near him.

He professed a friendly interest in the Fresh and asked if there was anything he could do for him.

Escobedo thanked him, but answered in the negative.

Then, in the course of conversation, the man happened to mention the name of Isabel Escobedo.

"The sister of Manuel?" the Fresh asked, understanding immediately that the lawyer had come expressly to speak of Isabel.

"Yes, she did not perish in the river as all the world supposed," the Mexican explained, "but, badly wounded, was swept down the stream for nearly a mile and then rescued by a fisherman. But her health has been broken since that day. Poor girl! she has not been able to go out of the house for the last three months, and her death is only a question of time."

The Fresh did not question him about the matter and he soon departed.

His errand was done though. Isabel Escobedo was prepared to prove an *alibi*. She could not be in Mexico and New York at the same time.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

WOMAN, CHANGEABLE AS THE WIND!

THAT day was fated to be one of surprises to the Fresh, for a short time after the Mexican departed, Katherine Habersham came to see him.

"You did not expect to see me, I presume?" she said.

"No, hardly."

"I am a miserable woman and have come to do a tardy act of justice," she exclaimed, her features harder and more masculine than ever.

"It is never too late to mend."

"True, but I fear my information will come too late to be of service to you. I am told that you are certain to be convicted."

"Oh, no, nothing is certain but death and taxes."

"You are an innocent man, I am sure, despite the net-work of evidence which has been woven around you. I knew that there was a foe plotting against you, and in my mad desire for vengeance I was willing to join hands with that foe, but now that this terrible blow has fallen upon you, I feel like a guilty creature—I feel as if some of the blood of your innocent, hapless wife was on my hands, and my soul grows sick with horror!" And the strong, resolute woman trembled as though stricken with the ague.

"Why, you had no hand in the deed!"

"No, but I knew that a foe was striving to ruin you, and if I had only spoken, her innocent life might have been spared; but I was wild with a desire to be revenged upon you, and when this woman urged me to join with her to crush you, I consented."

"A woman, eh?"

"Yes," and then Katherine related all the particulars of her interview with the Mexican lady who called herself Dolores Escoto.

"Monsieur Tonson come again," thought the Fresh. "Isabel Escobedo in another disguise."

"I blindly consented to act as her tool," Katherine said in conclusion, "but I knew nothing of this attack on your wife. I never dreamed that she would harm her."

"My poor girl died for me," the Fresh observed, sadly. "She was murdered, not that her life was desired, but that it would wring my heart, and then the affair was cunningly arranged so that it would appear as if I was the cowardly assassin."

"And will you be able to escape from the fiendish snare?" she asked, anxiously.

"Yes, I think so; skillfully as the trap was devised, fate stood my friend and interposed some obstacles so that it did not work as it was expected it would."

"I humbly ask your pardon, George—for you are, and ever will be George—to me, no matter what you may call yourself," she said, tears standing in the proud eyes. "I have deeply wronged you, but, in a measure, I was innocent. I believed that you were the man who robbed the bank, but I know the truth now; I know that you acted a hero's part, and took upon yourself my father's crime. He has confessed all to me, and it may be a satisfaction for you to know that the ones who wronged you have been overtaken by Heaven's vengeance."

"My father is a ruined man; some of his ventures have turned out badly, and but for aid which he received from Mr. Soaper, he would have failed long ago."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, it is the truth, and for months he has suffered the torments of the lost souls doomed to eternal suffering!" the woman exclaimed.

"Each day he has expected the exposure to come which would send him, a broken man out penniless into the world."

"Mr. Soaper, of course, has had no idea of the truth, or he would not have advanced the money, for he is a heartless wretch with no more soul than one of his money-bags."

"Yes, I think you are right, about him."

"And you can judge of the future which is before me, when I tell you that to-morrow I am to be married to this miserable old wretch, whom I despise, loathe and hate!"

"Why marry him then?"

"To save my father! I am about to sacrifice myself, as you sacrificed yourself years ago. I too can play the hero!"

"On our wedding day—before the ceremony takes place, mind you, for I have become such a doubter that I trust no one—Mr. Soaper settles on me the sum of two hundred thousand dollars, and pledges real estate to pay me fifty thousand dollars yearly. You see he is going to pay dearly for his conquest!"

"The two hundred thousand will release my father from his debts and put him on his feet again, and my income will enable me to lead a life of gayety, in the midst of which I hope to forget that I have been sold into slavery as truly as any negro that ever felt the master's whip!"

"The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceeding fine. You will have ample vengeance now, if it will make you happy to know that I am wretched."

"Oh, no, I forgive you freely, for I know I

have been to blame myself. But cheer up! as old Soaper's wife you will have a better life than you think for!"

"Ah, if you only knew how I hate that man now that I am forced to marry him!" she exclaimed rising to depart.

"One parting word: my father is not so bad as he appears; he would have paid back the money to the bank when you appeared, and so saved you trouble, but he was utterly unable to do it being so situated that he could not have raised a tenth part of the sum."

"Well, it is all right now; let the past be forgotten, and you have my best wishes for the future!"

"There is no future for me but one of misery!" she exclaimed as she departed.

Three months more passed rapidly by, and during that time so many sensations had arisen to claim the attention of the denizens of the metropolis that the Escobedo case was well-nigh forgotten; the second accusation we refer to, for the bank affair had been pigeon-holed, the district attorney declared it to be useless to try it.

The accusation against the Fresh was brought before the grand jury, and Lawyer Have, thanks to the zeal of the detectives, presented such an array of testimony, showing that the crime had been committed by some unknown party, who had cunningly contrived to arrange matters so it would appear as if the husband had played the part of the assassin that the grand jury were convinced of Escobedo's innocence and reported, "no cause for action."

This set the Fresh again at liberty.

"Now you are free to make a personal matter out of this affair," Lawyer Have remarked, after the grand jury reached a conclusion.

The lawyer had been informed of the visit of the Mexican attorney, and the news he brought of Isabel Escobedo.

"It would be a satisfaction, though, if I could drag her here to the scene of her crime and force her to answer for her cowardly murder!" the Fresh declared.

"Ah, but you can't do it, you know—not one chance out of a thousand, or I should say to you, 'go it!' But, my dear fellow, the game will not work! The woman arranged it too shrewdly; even if we had her here, it is a question with me if we could bring the crime home to her so she could be convicted, and as it is, I do not doubt that in her Mexican home she has a dozen witnesses, all ready to swear that she has been a helpless invalid, and has not been out of the house for six months!"

"Yes, we could not hope to do anything against such testimony. I must take the law in my own hands."

"Exactly, be judge, jury and executioner!" Lawyer Have declared. "Settle the matter in the free, breezy style of the frontier, where, even in a game of poker, four jacks and a bowie knife will beat four aces every time! Where a goodly number of the inhabitants go in for the fine old Rob Roy game: 'And this the Highland laddie's simple plan, that he should take who has the power, and he should keep who can!'"

It took the Fresh a week or so to arrange his affairs, and then, in company with Dave Ringwood, who had stuck to him through all his trouble, as true as steel, he set out for the West.

Straight onward, toward the land of the setting sun, they went as fast as the tireless iron horse would carry them, and when they came to the end of the steel tracks, they purchased good horses and still pushed on.

In time they came to where the Rio Grande rolled its yellow waters around to the Mexican Gulf.

They crossed the river and entered upon Mexican soil, halted not, except for refreshment and rest, until they found themselves in the old Mexican city of Chihuahua.

There they employed a trusty fellow to gain them news of Isabel Escobedo.

The agent was an American, but had lived so long in the town that he appeared to be as good a Mexican as any of them.

Strange was the tale that the man brought.

He had no difficulty in ascertaining the whereabouts of Isabel Escobedo.

The brilliant, handsome girl, who possessed both the beauty and the heart of a tiger, was in a madhouse, a raving lunatic.

"She has been sick for a long time, senors," the man said, "and a few months ago news came that her cousin, Margaret Escobedo, the daughter of the old Rio Grande cattle king, had been poisoned by her husband in New York, and she brooded over the matter until her reason fled."

"What think you of the tale?" asked Dave Ringwood, when they were alone.

"It is a trick to divert me from the path of retribution," the Fresh exclaimed. "She has been well served; her spics in New York warned her that the chances were that I would go free, and she suspected that I would come in haste to call her to an account."

"But God is just and I can wait."

"From this time forth Jackson Blake, the Fresh of Frisco, will disappear, and in his place will come Fresh, the Avenger!"

THE END.

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